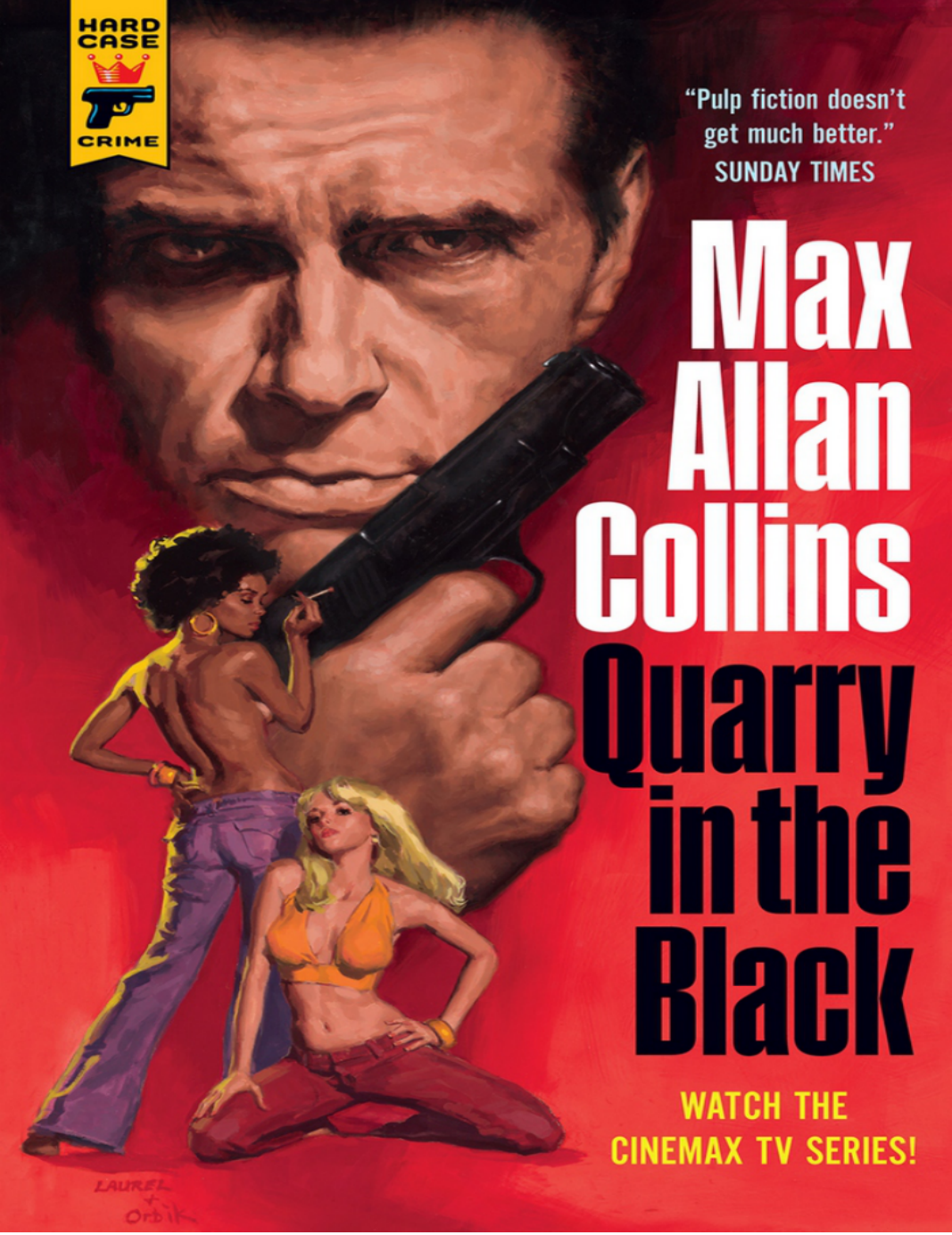
HARD CASE
CRIME
"Pulp fiction doesn't get much better."
SUNDAY TIMES
Max Allan Collins
Quarry in the Black
WATCH THE CINEMAX TV SERIES!
LAUREL
Orbit

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Where does a hit man draw the line? With a controversial presidential election just weeks away, Quarry is hired to carry out a rare political assignment: kill the Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd, a passionate civil rights crusader and campaigner for the underdog candidate. But when a hate group out of Ferguson, Missouri, turns out to be gunning for the same target, Quarry starts to wonder just who it is he's working for. The longest-running series from Max Allan Collins, author of Road to Perdition, the Quarry novels tell the story of a paid assassin with a rebellious streak and an unlikely taste for justice. Once a Marine sniper, Quarry found a new home stateside with a group of contract killers. But some men aren't made for taking orders — and when Quarry strikes off on his own, God help the man on the other side of his nine-millimeter.

- Max Allan Collins
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Max Allan Collins
Quarry in the Black

For Quarry's friends
Graham Gordy
& Michael D. Fuller

"Man was born into barbarism, when killing his fellow man was a normal condition of existence."

MARTIN LUTHER KING

"Look who's protesting! Shoot first is my motto."

FEARLESS FOSDICK

OCTOBER 1972

One

You may think, reading this one, that I've gone soft. Let me assure you that the only time I go soft is after fucking. Then I suffer an understandable physical reaction as well as a sleepy emotional affection for the female, whoever she might be, that lasts a good thirty seconds.

Now soft in the head, that's another matter altogether. For me to take on a contract like the one the Broker proposed to me at my A-frame on Paradise Lake that crisp fall evening, I had to be stupid or half-nuts or maybe completely greedy since it did, after all, involve a lot of dough.

In my defense, I was fairly new to the game. I had been killing people for money for less than two years, so maybe my relative inexperience played a role. Of course, *really* I'd been killing people for money a number of years longer than that, if you counted Vietnam; but the targets were "gooks," as we used to inelegantly put it, and the employer was Uncle Whiskers, not the Broker, who paid better — much better, in this instance.

With his rich man's tan and perfectly coiffed white hair with matching mustache — and his blue-plaid sportcoat, white pointed-collar sportshirt, navy slacks, and blue-toed white loafers — the Broker might have been a bank president or the dean of a small college on his day off. But he wasn't. Not a banker or a dean or on his day off, either.

This was a business call. And this distinguished-looking man's business was brokering contract killings, serving as the buffer between the respectable people who wanted someone dead and the disreputable types who made them that way. For money.

I might have been a college kid — grad student maybe — in my gray long-sleeve WISCONSIN sweatshirt, blue jeans and sneakers, though I'd never been to college (including the University of Wisconsin). What I really was was one of those disreputable types I mentioned above.

The Broker's age I could only guess at — forty? Fifty? As for me, I was in my twenties with thirty still seeming abstract, a fairly average-looking guy at five ten and one-hundred-sixty pounds, fit from frequent swims at the Lake Geneva YMCA, with brown hair longer than it used to be. But that was true of Broker's generation, too, wasn't it? Parents were wearing hair that they'd abhorred on their kids just a few years ago.

Having the Broker inside my A-frame home was unusual — during the years I worked with him (which would eventually total five

and change) he had done that maybe three or four times. More normally we met at the hotel he co-owned in Davenport, on his home turf of the Iowa/Illinois Quad Cities. Or we met at some out-of-the-way spot halfway or so between here and there, a truckstop on an Interstate or a bar in some city or town.

But right now we were sitting each on his own side of a dark brown overstuffed modular couch that made an L arranged around a metal fireplace in the midst of my living-room, itself part of a big open area overseen by a loft and shared with a kitchenette. Only a few lights were on.

It was evening and a fire was going. The Broker had enough angles in a face out of a *Playboy* liquor ad that the flicker of flames turned him into a good subject for a charcoal sketch, if I were a fucking artist, which I'm not.

"Quarry," he said, resting his bottle of Coors on a coaster on the low-slung glass-topped table between him and the fire, "I want you to understand that you are free to take a pass on this one. No harm, no foul, as they say in the sporting world. But if you *do* say yes, keep in mind: *volenti non fit injuria*."

"Yeah," I said, "I was just thinking that."

Quarry was, by the way, the name the Broker had tagged me with — all of us in his network of mostly war-bred assassins had what I considered cutesy monikers. According to the Broker — who as you've already seen was one pretentious son of a bitch — mine signified that I was hollowed out "as if from rock." As for my real name, you don't need it.

"Decline this opportunity," he said, with a magnanimous gesture, flames turning his tan orange, "and it will in no way reflect badly upon you."

"Wouldn't want it on my permanent record." My legs, crossed at the ankles, were on an ottoman. My bottle of Coke was on the little table. I am not a heavy drinker, even if I had been on a bender when the Broker first looked me up.

My guest lifted two palms toward me. "I would completely understand were you to say no. This assignment — strictly volunteer — is quite outside our usual methodology."

He used words like "methodology" a lot. I wasn't kidding when I said he was pretentious. Also pompous, if there's a difference.

"Well," I said with a shrug, "the job in Biloxi wasn't usual. But it paid well. Does this?"

He nodded. "Very well indeed. And there *are* similarities to that assignment, although you would not be on your own this go-round — rather, you'd be working with Boyd, as is the norm."

I'd been partnered with Boyd for some months now. He generally

worked the passive side, going in early and collecting intel on the target, while I handled the active role, coming in a week or so before the hit and carrying it out. The passive role sometimes included providing back-up and escape support.

"For the moment I must remain vague about our subject," he said. He meant the poor bastard I'd be killing. "That's requisite, because should you say no to this, it's best for all concerned — yourself included — that you remain blessed with the bliss that is ignorance."

Christ, this guy.

"How much?" I asked. Usually I cleared about five thousand.

"Twenty-five thousand," he said.

My eyebrows went up. I didn't send them in that direction — it was entirely their own idea.

I said, "How much of that is my end?"

"That *is* your end."

I squinted at him. "If this is political—"

"It has a political aspect," he admitted, lifting one palm this time, and firelight flickered there like a silent movie gone out of focus, "but we're not talking about a political assassination per se."

"Per what then?"

"As I said, we can't talk about the identity of the subject until we discuss a... broader outline, and if that outline suits you, then we will move on to specifics."

"Is the target bigger than a breadbox?"

"It's not a politician, either in or out of office. But it *is* a public figure — the kind of public figure who is well insulated and, at public appearances, well guarded by local police and occasionally by those higher up the law-enforcement food chain."

"So shooting from a rooftop or a high window might not be practical." I'd been a sniper in Vietnam and I preferred it that way. Anonymous, impersonal.

"No. Unless you consider Lee Harvey Oswald or James Earl Ray suitable role models."

I kicked the ottoman away and put my feet on the floor. Some wind was rattling the glass doors onto the deck and howling through the skeletal trees surrounding the lake — nature could be so fucking corny sometimes.

Leaning forward, my hands clasped between my legs, I said, "Fill it in some. That outline of yours."

He leaned forward, too, swiveling toward me as I had him. "Like the Biloxi job, this will require you going undercover. Joining the subject's organization — *not* an overtly criminal one, by the by. This should be easily accomplished. Once in, you will study the landscape, seeking a window."

“Landscapes don’t have windows.”

“My apologies for the mixed metaphor,” he said, just a tad testily, “but what I’m saying is that you will need to do your own fact-finding beyond what your partner will do from his perch. Boyd is on this job, with or without you, already. He is stationed across the way from the subject’s organizational headquarters.”

How could this fucker provide so much information without giving me anything, really?

“Sounds like,” I said, “we already have a window. A literal one. Just pop him from ‘across the way.’ ”

He shook his head and, I swear, a finger. “The subject both arrives and exits through an alley behind his headquarters. He has bodyguards, and I doubt the idea of conducting a fire fight in an alley would hold much appeal to you.”

“Not much,” I said. “What about the target’s residence?”

“Difficulties there as well. But you are welcome to find a way to make that work for you. En route from home to work and back again might also suggest a possibility. Still, I believe you’ll need inside access to accomplish that, due to the specific exigencies.”

I had no idea what an exigency was, specific or non-specific.

He was saying, “You’ll have a literal deadline — the end of the month. This must be done before the last weekend in October. Before a big outdoor event on Saturday of that weekend.”

“Not at the ‘big outdoor event?’ ”

“No. For the reasons previously cited.”

But by now I well understood that this wasn’t just any killing — not the usual cheating spouse or troublesome business partner, nor the occasional mob hit we carried out to keep suspicion off the local bent-nose who hired it.

Not when the Broker shows up on my turf to present this job with the delicacy of asking a father from the old country for his daughter’s hand. Not when he comes alone, minus one of his usual driver/bodyguards at the wheel of his Caddie.

And he had.

“Doesn’t hold office,” I said.

“Does not.”

“Isn’t *running* for office.”

“Is not.”

“You realize I do not *like* getting next to a target. It’s dangerous in every way there is.”

His ice-blue eyes reflected dancing flames. “I know, Quarry. But a twenty-five-thousand-dollar payday requires a certain sacrifice.”

“Getting my head blown off isn’t my idea of a ‘certain sacrifice.’ Neither is spending the rest of my life in prison. Death Row isn’t on a

lake."

He gave up an elaborate shrug and said, "Granted."

"God fucking damnit," I said, tossing a hand. "Who *is* it? But if it's the guy who plays Archie Bunker, I'm not interested."

He frowned. "Who?"

"It was a joke, Broker. My life's ambition is making you crack a smile."

"You may be disappointed."

That made me crack a smile. He was one up on me.

"So, then. Are you on board, Quarry?"

"Yeah," I said, and it was a sigh. "Holding onto the railing, hoping the ship doesn't hit an iceberg, but yeah."

Then he smiled faintly — not at my weak humor but in satisfaction for having lured me in — and reached for the manila envelope beside him on the couch. Handed it across to me.

The close-up photo on top of the paper-clipped documents was from the AP wire service; so were a few others, taken at speaking events. Still others were surveillance shots. The latter had various individuals circled and identified, obviously people on the target's staff. He had the kind of handsome, well-carved features you find on an African tribal mask or the hero of a blaxploitation flick. No major Afro or sideburns, though, and no flashy threads — dark suit, dark tie, like an undertaker.

Or a preacher.

"I've seen this guy," I said, "on the news. Don't remember his name."

"The Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd," the Broker said, enunciating each word as if I were taking notes. Mentally I was.

"Civil rights activist," I said, in a thinking-out-loud way. "Kind of getting to be a big deal."

"Many think he's the next Martin Luther King," the Broker said, nodding, smiling again, pleased that his slow student had some smidgen of knowledge. "But Reverend Lloyd stays unaffiliated with any major activist groups, whether traditional like the NAACP or the more radical SNCC. He's his own man with his own organization."

I flipped through some materials that provided background well beyond what Boyd might have gathered; this was clearly a job that had been in the planning stages long before either Boyd or I had been brought in.

The Broker sat quietly, sipping his beer, while I skimmed the materials, which included magazine and newspaper clippings. All I knew going in was what I'd picked up from the nightly newscast, when it happened to be on while I ate a TV dinner or something. I vaguely remembered that Lloyd had come up through the St. Louis

slums and been involved in drug dealing, but had got religion in prison.

Upon his release, he became pastor of a small church in St. Louis and built a following; after the church was burned to the ground, Lloyd did not rebuild, at least not the church itself. Instead he struck out as an activist leader.

According to a *Time* magazine piece, former dealer Lloyd of all the black leaders of our day was the one who spoke out most forcefully against illegal narcotics on ghetto streets. They were "genocide," he said. Heroin was "a plague upon our people."

I put the materials back in the envelope, and tossed it back on the little table.

I said, "I know I pressured you into revealing who the subject was... but this isn't for me."

His expression was placid. "Why is that?"

"It's just not what I signed on for. You made it clear in our very first meeting, going on two years now, that by the time I'd be called in on a job, the person targeted was already dead, in a way. That when somebody is willing to pay good money to have somebody else taken out, well, out that second somebody goes."

He'd begun nodding before I finished. "That's correct. Another way to look at it is that if you don't take a job, someone else will. The subject will die, whether you are the means or not."

One actor refuses a role, he'd said in that first meeting, *and another steps in. Because the show must go on.*

I gestured to the manila envelope. "But you also said that any target in my crosshairs would be there as a result of their own actions. They screwed somebody's wife, they embezzled money, they were criminals who got on the bad side of other criminals. Not... not somebody decent, for Christ's sake."

He grinned. I finally made him smile. Really smile. In a coochy-coo of a voice he said, "Why, is that a sense of moral outrage I detect, Quarry?"

The fire felt hot on my face. "I don't know that I want to kill somebody because a client doesn't like black people. Somebody in my crosshairs because they're the wrong color? Not my deal. Even for twenty-five k."

The smile was fading but lingered; he leaned toward me. "That's something I like about you, Quarry. Unlike most of the Vietnam veterans I work with, you returned home with some semblance of humanity buried inside there."

"I thought I was carved out of rock."

He flipped a hand. "My first impression. Now I realize that you have standards. Perhaps even a code of sorts. In a world without

meaning, that can come in handy. But it can also get in the way."

I raised both hands as if in surrender. "I'm not going to rat you out or anything, Broker. I just want to take a pass. No harm, no foul, remember?"

He did something then that he had never done before. He called me by my real name, which let's say is John, which it isn't.

"John," he said. "I respectfully request that you set aside any compunctions about the killing of a good man. Raymond Wesley Lloyd is *not* a good man."

Why was it that assassins and their victims so often had three names?

"Well, he looks pretty goddamn good to me," I said, nodding toward the envelope. "Kill him if you want, just leave me out of it."

Maybe I wouldn't have been so quick to turn down that kind of money if I hadn't had a particularly good year. Biloxi had paid off very well, in ways the Broker wasn't wholly aware of.

Then something crawled up my spine.

"Or," I said, "have I just made myself a loose end? This *is* political, Broker. You fucking lied to me!"

He shook his head and his voice turned calming. "No, I said there was a political aspect. I made that point quite clearly. Anyway, Reverend Lloyd may *present* himself as the logical replacement for Martin Luther King... and that the public currently perceives him as such certainly complicates matters... but I assure you he is made of more common clay than Reverend King."

At least the Broker didn't add "may he rest in peace" after that.

I was studying him. "How common a clay are we talking about?"

A one-shoulder shrug. "His strident condemnations of drug use amongst the poorest of the black populace fall into the area of 'methinks he doth protest too much.' "

"Speak American."

"He retains connections, shall we say, to his roots — he is largely funded by white gangsters who run dope in the city that is his home base, St. Louis, Missouri. It's a hypocritical front, yes, albeit a rather brilliant one — who would suspect when Raymond Wesley Lloyd takes his anti-drug message on the road, a core group within his organization is moving caches of the poison?"

I was frowning. "So this is a mob hit?"

The Broker recoiled. "Quarry, you know I can't confirm or deny that. This may be an unusual job, but we must retain the compartmentalization that makes all of us safe."

"Yeah. Sorry. Okay."

One eyebrow went up. "Okay? Does that mean you accept the assignment?"

"...I'm in."

He clapped once, like a pasha summoning a slave. “You’ve viewed the background material. Questions?”

“Mostly just one,” I said. “What makes you think a white boy like me can just wander into a black activist HQ and pull up a chair? Blackface went out with Eddie Cantor.”

He was shaking his head again. “You won’t be the only white face in the room. Civil Rights activism has always attracted young guilty liberals, particularly right now.”

“Why right now?”

Another smile. “Reverend Lloyd is in the midst of a tour of college campuses, working to get out the vote for George McGovern in the presidential race.”

I opened my mouth but no words came out. Even a non-political type like me, who only caught the occasional newscast, was aware that Nixon was slaughtering McGovern in the polls, with the election just a few weeks away.

He could tell what I was thinking and said, “Democrats and assorted left-wing rabble are holding out hope that the polls are wrong, or at least can be *made* to be wrong.”

“Why? How?”

He frowned. “Do you ever read a paper, Quarry? This is the first year that the under twenty-ones can vote. Right now various famous bleeding hearts — politicians, movie stars, folk singers, rock and rollers — are beating the campus bushes, hoping the anti-war youth will create a November surprise.”

“And Lloyd is part of that.”

“Yes. But he won’t be part of any November surprise.”

“Probably not. Nixon’s the one.”

“That’s not what I refer to, Quarry.”

“What *do* you refer to?”

“The October surprise you’ll give him.”

Two

Getting to St. Louis took a little over seven hours. I left around noon, the day after the Broker came calling, going by way of Route 47, I-55 and Route 66 (no sign of Tod and Buz).

I'd have made it in maybe an hour less if I hadn't stopped in Chicago to buy a used cobalt-blue Chevy Impala SS for fifteen hundred cash — a sweet ride with enough muscle for getaway contingencies, and an eight-track to accommodate my Doors, Badfinger and Rolling Stones tapes. My green Opel GT I parked in an extended-stay lot near O'Hare Airport. These things take time, particularly if you catch a meal and take a shit.

I had an address for Boyd's lookout on East Euclid in the Central West End of St. Louis, but also a phone number. I called that first from a booth at a gas station on the outskirts. It took only three rings.

"...yes?" came Boyd's hesitant, breathy baritone.

"Me. Fancy. Got a phone and everything, huh?"

"It's not a tin can with a string. Man, this is one sweet pad. Wait'll you see it. Rivals Cleveland, if you can believe that."

"I'm maybe fifteen minutes out, but I don't know St. Louis. Talk me in."

"Where you calling from?"

I told him and he gave me directions.

In twenty minutes I was on East Euclid in a lively area of bars, restaurants, clubs, boutiques, head shops and what have you. Not surprisingly, St. Louis was warmer than Paradise Lake, Wisconsin. I was in blue jeans and a black Levi's sweatshirt under a brown corduroy jacket with fake fleece lining and collar, the latter almost too warm here. If so, I had a windbreaker in my suitcase for fallback.

A brick building, with Boyd on the second of three floors over a hippie-ish dress shop, was across from a storefront with

ST. LOUIS CIVIL RIGHTS COALITION

in white letters on windows through which a now-empty warren of desks could be glimpsed between plastered campaign posters: TOGETHER FOR McGOVERN, McGOVERN — TELLS IT LIKE IT IS, COME HOME AMERICA — McGOVERN/SHRIVER, and a red-white-and-blue hand making the two-finger peace symbol above the words McGOVERN '72.

Where were the anti-war candidates when I needed them?

Tricky Dick was always flashing that two-finger gesture, too —

that blue-jawed square was hip enough to figure out that kids would read it as peace and grown-ups as victory. I wouldn't vote for that prick for dog catcher, but you had to give it to him.

I left the Impala in a graveled recession behind the building; I might have gone up the stairs to the rear deck, but Boyd had advised coming around front. So my small suitcase and I did that, stopping at a doorway between the hippie dress shop and a bar where a band was playing "Magic Carpet Ride," badly. The smell of burgers cooking said there'd be food handy. That was good.

The neighborhood itself appeared to be a white one, but not so white that Reverend Raymond Lloyd couldn't set up shop here. And I'd bet college kids and young singles of both races were mingling in these bars and clubs. Girls were always trying to prove how unprejudiced they were, and also to see if what they heard about black guys was true.

I went up carpeted stairs to a landing with a yellow light giving the place jaundice. Only one apartment here, though the stairs went on up, presumably to another. I knocked softly.

A few seconds and Boyd's voice came, as soft as my knock. "Yes?"

"Me," I said.

The door had no peephole but it did have a nightlatch, and he cracked the door and peered over the chain, making sure. His flat, scarred face looked up at me — he was maybe five-six, offset by his broad-shouldered frame. His hair was thick, curly and brown, with eyebrows and mustache to match; he looked like a cross between a boxer and an Italian organ grinder.

"Quarry," he said, a smile in his voice as well as on his face. "Missed you, man."

We hadn't done a job in several months.

"Swordfish," I said.

"Huh?"

"That's the password. Let me the fuck in. I been driving all day."

"Sure, sure, sure," the slice of his face said, and he unlatched the door and opened it for me.

I stepped inside and put my suitcase down and found myself in a decent apartment.

This was a spacious living room, furnished — Sears or Montgomery Ward stuff, dating to the early '60s — with a row of windows on the street that made a perfect lookout post. A cushion appropriated from the couch made a seat for him by the window at farthest right, like a sultan might sit on, with a bedroom pillow propped against the wall, so he could lean back there and stare out sideways.

Near the cushion were binoculars, for closer looks at those

coming and going. A .38 long-barreled Smith and Wesson Model 29 revolver was on the floor near his cushion — a good weapon, but you can't silence revolvers, so I stick to nine millimeters, despite occasional jamming.

A console TV (*Kung Fu* on screen now, sound low) was against the wall at left, near the windows, so he could have it on while he worked, if he kept his eyes on the street. Probably he didn't turn it on while he was on the job, though, as he'd placed a portable radio near his post. He'd have the radio on an easy-listening station, no doubt — he was a good ten years older than me, though his age never came up.

I had a look around. The layout was boxcar — a bedroom, another bedroom, and a small kitchen, each opening onto the other. Boyd had taken the first bedroom — the bed unmade, a paperback on the nightstand called *Midtown Queen* with a bodybuilder on the cover (your job is to figure out Boyd's sexual preference and then get back to me) — which left the adjacent bedroom for me. Each bedroom had a dresser and a double bed. Nothing fancy, but relatively speaking the Ritz, since more commonly we got stuck with unfurnished shitholes and had to sleep on the floor in sleeping bags, like fucking Boy Scouts.

I tossed my suitcase on the bed and went on into the kitchen.

"Jesus," I said, looking in the refrigerator, which was stocked with cold cuts, sliced cheese and Budweiser, "this really isn't bad."

Boyd had tagged after. He was in his undershirt and brown bellbottoms and bare feet, a solidly built guy who could take care of himself in a brawl. But his dark eyes had long lashes that were almost pretty and made women love him. For what good it did them.

"We can cook here," he said.

I gestured to the Wonder Bread on the counter. "Stick with sandwiches. Please don't stink the place with your cooking. This place has the ventilation of a coffin."

"Okay. Plenty of places around here to grab a bite, starting with that bar-and-grill next-door below. And all my stakeout work is by day."

He'd been nice enough to buy some cans of Coke. I took one and popped the top. I shut the fridge door and asked him, "You're not staking out the mark's residence?"

He shook his head. "No. Broker said don't bother. We're talking a colored neighborhood. Pretty nice. But my white mug would stand out."

I gave him a look. "Boyd, they don't say 'colored' anymore."

A shrug. "Okay, then. Negro."

"Welcome to 1956."

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

I sat at the Formica-topped table. It dated at least to the year I'd just mentioned, though the appliances had come in with the furniture a decade or so ago. He joined me, sitting across, leaning forward eagerly. He had been working this job for three weeks and he was starved for human company. Technically I qualified.

I asked, "You're just working days, then?"

He nodded toward the front of the apartment. "Sometimes they come back in the evenings. So I keep a loose watch on the place. No pattern, though, other than they come in around eight A.M. and stay till six."

"What about lunch?"

"They mostly brown-bag it. I'm not sure about Lloyd himself."

I sipped my Coke. "Does he ever leave by the front?"

"Sure. Lots of times. But, again — no pattern, not even where lunch is concerned. Sometimes a cab pulls up, sometimes one of his people pulls up in one car or another. Nothing helpful."

"Bodyguards?"

"Oh yeah. Always. Big and Negro and tougher-lookin' than Joe Frazier."

"Not Negro. Black."

"Quarry, that's racist."

"*Black* is racist?"

"Right. You better get with it."

I rubbed my forehead. He lived out east with his hairdresser "wife," for Christ's sake. Didn't he have what they called an alternate lifestyle? Yet he was about as hip as a dockworker.

"I'll watch it," I assured him.

"You damn well better. I mean, you're going undercover with those people, right?"

I nodded. Those people.

"You don't want to get on their bad side." He shook his head. "Undercover like a damn cop. That's a new one."

"I did it before, just not with you."

He gave a little shudder. "Doesn't it make you nervous?"

"The money's better, so I'll get a grip."

Boyd gulped some Bud. "We don't wanna blow this one, Quarry. I mean, ten grand is one sweet haul."

I didn't know if he meant ten grand that we were splitting or if that was his end, and I didn't ask.

I just said, "Very damn sweet."

Normally it was an equal split. But the Broker obviously knew my end was higher risk and that it would take real bread to convince me to take on the job. Anyway, Boyd didn't need to know what I was taking home.

I asked him, “What do you have so far?”

Boyd said that he’d played pedestrian several days to witness Lloyd arriving at the HQ alley door via a black Grand Prix complete with driver and paired bodyguards. His exit varied depending on how late they worked, but the Grand Prix pulled in at five-fifty P.M., ready to pick him up whenever.

“Not very useful,” I said.

“Not very. Mornings, they drop him right at the door and evenings he comes out, climbs in and he’s gone.”

“What about meals?”

“There are half a dozen restaurants where he takes lunch. I followed him to another half a dozen where he occasionally takes supper. Two soul food joints and several Italian places on the Hill, where he gets dirty looks but served. Plenty of white people in this town don’t like Negroes, let me tell you.”

“Nothing useful there.”

“No. I can see why the Broker is sending you in to get close and cuddly, but I don’t envy you.”

“Don’t you like Negroes, Boyd?”

Another shudder. “I don’t like them when they weigh two-fifty and pack guns in shoulder holsters, no, sir.”

“Don’t be a bigot. They say once you go black you never go back.”

“Fuck you, Quarry. What’s your in with these people?”

I told him I had I.D. that made me John Blake, a Vietnam War veteran who won a Bronze Star. Seems I’d been active with a number of Nam Vets against the war, and was anxious to help get a peace candidate like George McGovern elected.

“That gets you in,” Boyd said, nodding. “What gets you in the inner circle?”

I sipped Coke. “My charm.”

Teeth blossomed under the dark shaggy mustache. “Well, you *are* one winning son of a bitch.”

“Thank you.”

“But you won’t have your nine millimeter with you. I mean, you’re going in looking like a college kid, right? Jeans and shit.”

“Right. But I brought a suit along. Two in fact. And a few ties and white shirts. And both are cut to conceal a shoulder holster.”

He grinned again, half-amused, half-impressed. “A stick-it-in-your-waistband type like you? I never remember you wearing one of those.”

“On one job I did,” I said. “You weren’t there. A solo gig.”

His voice turned teasing. “Were you lonely without me?”

“It was terrible. But I thought about you when I beat off at night.”

He flushed. He didn't like that.

I said, "I almost didn't take this job."

"Really? Why?"

"Well, this Lloyd character didn't seem to fit the profile."

"What do you mean, profile?"

I shrugged. "Usually we take out people who... well, I don't want to say 'have it coming,' because that's not it exactly. More like they got themselves in whatever mess they're in, and they're already dead, really. They just don't know it."

"Walkin' obituaries," Boyd said, and gulped some more Bud. He'd finished the can, and got up and got himself a fresh one. When he sat back down, he asked, "What made you change your mind? The money?"

"The money was part of it. But then the Broker told me that Reverend Lloyd was dirty. A phony preaching one thing and doing another."

He was nodding. "Yeah, that black bastard's moving dope, Broker says, although not out of that storefront. I bet it's these rallies he's off doing, two or three a week now."

"You follow him to any?"

He shook his head, once. "No. Broker said stay put. Said you'd be doing that, once you wormed your way inside."

"I guess that's right. You'd start being a familiar face popping up once too often. That means you've had some days off with pay. Not bad."

"Not bad," he admitted. "I've seen *Lady Sings the Blues* three times."

Lucky him.

"Boyd, tell me — what if he was straight, this Lloyd?"

Boyd frowned. "Well, *isn't* he straight? I mean, he's married, though that doesn't always—"

"Not that kind of straight. What if that wasn't a front across the way, and the Rev was for real?"

"What if he was?"

"Would you still take the contract?"

He crinkled his chin and shrugged. "Why not?"

"Well, they say... a lot of people think... he's the new Martin Luther King."

"Yeah. And?"

"Would you have done *that* job?"

"What job?"

"Martin Luther King, dummy! Or JFK or Bobby?"

Boyd waved that off. "Nutballs did the two Kennedy brothers."

"Maybe not. Plenty of people say they were contract jobs, fitted

up with fall guys."

He almost choked on his beer. "Now *you're* the nutball! Quarry the conspiracy nutball, that's a good one."

I drank some Coke. "I asked the Broker about the Kennedys once and he said something interesting."

"What?"

" 'Don't believe everything you read in the papers.' "

He was frowning. "If they were really contracts, those kills, so what?"

I locked eyes with him, something I rarely did. "So would you have taken them on? King, for example."

Squinting one eye, he said, "Well, that one probably *was* a contract. That James Earl Jones guy."

"James Earl Ray."

"Whoever. Some dude that got paid to do it."

"Would you have done it, Boyd?"

"Not for the kind of money *we* usually get. Not even for ten grand."

"But if the money were right?"

"...I think so. Retirement money, yeah, you bet."

"Martin Luther King. How about Bobby Kennedy? Or Jack?"

He thought for a few moments. "High six figures. Political hits are high risk in lots of ways, but sure, I'd take a flier."

I finished my Coke.

"What about you, Quarry?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

That seemed to annoy him. "Why not? Yeah, yeah, I get you, they're good people, decent men, maybe great men. But they're like anybody else we take out — they *put* themselves there. They made enemies. They became walkin' obits like everybody we hit. So if somebody's gonna get rich, why shouldn't it be us? You? Me?"

Rich like Oswald? Or Sirhan Sirhan? Or James Earl Ray?

Boyd said, "What makes you so holier than thou, all of a sudden?"

"Nothing. I just didn't sign on for anything political."

Boyd said nothing. But I'd got him thinking.

I sighed. Got to my feet. "I'm gonna go get myself something to eat."

"Want company?"

"No thanks. I want to get the hang of the neighborhood. Got a key for me?"

"Sure," he said, and fished it out of pocket. "Listen, Quarry, the way this flat is set up, you gotta walk through my bedroom to get to yours. By the time you get back, I may already be asleep. I'll have the door shut, so just knock and say it's you. That way you won't get

accidentally shot or anything."

"Okay."

"And the can, Quarry, it's off your bedroom, so I'll do the same, if I need to use it."

"Fine."

"I don't want to get accidentally shot, either."

"Who does?"

I crushed the Coke can, tossed it in the wastebasket in a corner.

Said, "I'm going to shower and change my clothes."

"Okay."

"You want to watch, it'll cost you a buck."

He grinned. "Fuck you, Quarry."

"That'd be ten bucks."

He was smiling and shaking his head as he and his Bud headed out to the living room.

When I left, in fresh jeans and a nice sportshirt and the windbreaker, he was sitting on the floor in front of the TV, Indian-style, watching Dean Martin flirt with the Golddiggers.

Going down the stairs, I thought, *Sure you'd have taken on King or the Kennedys, you gay asshole. All* you'd *have to do is surveil the fuckers.*

Three

The Euclid Bar and Grill, practically downstairs from Boyd, served food till ten P.M. and I was there in plenty of time. The small kitchen turned out real French fries with some of the skin on — not the frozen crap so frequently foisted on innocent diners — and my cheeseburger was thick, medium-rare and smothered in grilled onions. Life was good.

But the band was bad, living up to my first impression, butchering songs by a few groups I liked, Deep Purple, Crazy Horse, and others I didn't, Black Oak Arkansas, REO Speed-wagon, though even they deserved better. Finally the guilty parties took a break and the jukebox spat out "Elected" by Alice Cooper, which considering the job that lay ahead seemed appropriate.

The bar was goddamn smoky and mostly lit by beer neons and the band's lighting on the little stage. The clientele ran to college-age and young professionals, with something of a unisex vibe, most of the females in the same tight-fitting flared pants and patterned tops as the males, yellow and red a preferred color, though miniskirts popped up here and there, nostalgic for the recently passed '60s. My longish hair might have been a butch for all the shoulder-length hair these guys wore, while the young women sported both very short and very long 'dos.

Falling in the latter category, my waitress was in a white blouse and black slacks, a curvy button-nose redhead too cute for her own good, and we'd struck up a relationship based on silly smiles and her leaning in to my booth, trying to talk over the band and take my order and me doing the same trying to give it.

Now that I'd finished my food, and the Marshall-amp-driven band was on break, she came around and was easily heard over the jukebox, which merely blared.

"Well, now, honey," she said, just a slight Southern lilt coloring her pleasant second soprano, "you jus' *hated* that, didn't you?"

The only thing left on my plate were a few smears of ketchup, like blood trails of the dying. "Sucked."

She laughed with more music than that band could ever muster, a busty girl threatening to pop the buttons on her blouse. "You want another Coke, honey?"

"Better not."

"Oh, had enough of the hard stuff, have we?"

"I don't want to be up all night."

"Is that so bad, sugar?"

"What?"

"A man who's up all night?" And she winked and went off with my dirty dishes.

Cornball flirtation maybe, but the head of my dick woke up and started looking around. So did I, or anyway I kept my eye on her. I was just wondering if she teased all the guys she waited on like that. Upon observation, she seemed to, those not paired off with some chick, at any rate.

That struck me as a little dicey. That hint of a Southern accent said she probably wasn't originally from St. Louis, maybe even a recent arrival, and a friendly country girl could easily get herself in some big city trouble.

Not my business. Anyway, most guys were just smiling back at her, like I was, and probably leaving nice tips, so what the hell. But there was this one long-dark-haired, droopy-mustached dude standing at the bar — sporting light-blue denim slacks, a red shirt with tiny white polka dots, and (I swear) a little matching denim hat — who was getting out of line.

The waitress (her name tag said BECKY) was taking an order at one of the little tables between the bar and the booths along the wall. He put his hand on her ass and kind of rubbed, like he had a chamois and her rump was a fender. She glared over her shoulder at him and shook her head; he stopped, raised surrender hands, and she gave her smiling attention back to a couple at their table.

The denim-cap jackass leaned against the bar next to another winner, a shoulder-length blond guy in a tailored black shirt and black-and-white plaid bell bottoms. Both had pointed shoes and looked like they fell off an Osmonds LP.

The latter guy grabbed Becky by the arm as she walked by, and jerked her to a stop. I don't know what he said to her, but his upper lip curled back and he gave her the kind of leer that made bad records like "I Am Woman" happen.

She pulled away, frowning, maybe a little scared.

Again, none of my business. I was finished with my food and there would be no more Coca-Cola tonight. The check was five-something and I left her a ten, hoping that might make up for some of the indignities she'd suffered at the handsy hands of my gender.

I let myself in and Boyd was still up, watching Johnny Carson.

"Get any?" he asked, with that same kind of leer. Like he was interested in pussy.

But I just shook my head and went on into my bedroom. I was still in the windbreaker. On the nightstand was the Louis L'Amour paperback I was in the middle of — *The Daybreakers*.

"Fuck it," I said to nobody, and got the nine-millimeter Browning out of my suitcase. Brown walnut grips, blued finish, thirteen-shot

magazine. I stuffed it into my waistband and zipped the windbreaker over it. Boyd was right that I wasn't naturally a shoulder-holster type.

My booth was still empty, though the ten was gone and the table had been wiped off, and I slid back in. The band was still on break and the jukebox was playing Three Dog Night — "Family of Man." Some couples were dancing on the small dance floor.

She noticed me and came over. She leaned in closer than before and I got a better look at her — rounded oval face, freckled nose and cheeks, lush lips sticky with pink lip gloss, green eyes with green eye shadow, and an explosion of fiery, shoulders-brushing curls.

"Are you back, honey, or are you still here?"

"I stepped out for some air. Getting kind of thick in here."

"Hell, I don't even notice it no more." She shook her head. "Been waitressin' since high school. I inhaled more cigarette smoke than a Marlboro man."

Of course I hadn't been talking about cigarette smoke.

She pulled away a tad, asking lightly, "Change your mind about that Coke?"

"No. Am I taking up valuable real estate?"

"We're pretty slow. Don't worry about it."

She hipped it to the waitress station toward the end of the bar. Two others were working the floor and it was overkill. The denim-cap dipshit and the plaid-pants idiot were next to her. When she leaned forward, her bottom tipped up and the denim-cap could not resist. He petted her ass like a puppy. She glared at him and brushed his hand away like an insect. A big one.

The bartender — the only guy in the place older than 25, a burly slug — saw this go down. He was polishing a glass to pretend he was working — as she'd said, it was fairly slow — and all he did was smile. Boys will be boys. And it *was* a nice ass, I had to admit. Full. Ripe. Jesus, men are shit.

She collected a tall glass of something from the slug and came back over to me. Turned out the drink was for me.

"Ginger ale," she said. "No caffeine. So you won't be up all night. Shame."

I thanked her, sipped, said, "I'm kind of partial to ginger."

"Are you, honey? I get off at midnight. Scheduled till two, but Lou said I should take off early."

I shrugged. "Sure. I have nothing on."

"Maybe later," she said, smiling her pink sticky smile, "I can say the same."

Okay, so she was an outrageous flirt. Maybe even borderline slutty. But I didn't care if she was the biggest tramp in St. Louis, I didn't want those bastards manhandling her.

She started away and I touched her sleeve. Just touched it.

"Becky," I said, "do you know those two characters at the bar? Are they regulars? Maybe one a boyfriend or an ex?"

She shook her head and her hair was like strawberry cotton candy a kid was shaking on its paper cone. "Never saw 'em before. I don't know whether they're passin' through or from some privileged part of town."

"Well, their privileges shouldn't include playing grab ass with the help."

She touched my sleeve. But then she squeezed. "You're nice. What's your name?"

"Jack," I said.

"So is it a date, honey? I know somewhere we can go."

"It's a date."

She smiled and made dimples, emphasizing the kind of apple cheeks that make a boy long for the girl next door. Long for fucking her, I mean.

She swiveled off and I watched her deposit her tray at the end of the bar. She was heading toward the back of the place just as the band was starting up again. Without premeditation, they murdered "American Woman."

And the American woman I was watching was heading into the cubbyhole to the right of the stage off of which were the men's and ladies' rooms.

I sipped my ginger ale and let my eyes drift to the bar. Would Heckle and Jeckle be watching her? Yes. They were watching her. Would they follow her to have some more fun? Yes. They would follow her.

I doubted they'd have fun, though.

I slid from the booth, unzipped my windbreaker and headed down the aisle between booths and tables and crossed in front of the band and gave them a thumbs-up, poor talentless bastards, and headed into the little restroom alcove. The blond was trying the ladies' door, but it was locked. A joint like this wouldn't splurge for more than one stool per can.

The two guys shrugged at each other and leaned against the wall by the men's-room door, waiting for her. A white guy with a beige Afro came out of the men's and brushed by the pair and headed into the bar.

That was all I needed.

I moved into the little area, gestured toward the men's, and asked the denim-cap clown, "Are you waiting?"

His voice was low as he nodded toward the ladies' room door. "Just waitin' for some twat." He jerked a thumb at the men's room.

“It’s all yours, bud.”

“Thanks,” I said, and grabbed him by the arm and hauled him in with me.

The blond said, “Hey!” and joined us. I pushed him past me, kicked the door shut and locked it. Close quarters. A urinal, a boothless crapper, and a sink and a hand drier. No paper towels. I hate that.

“You hit on my sister again,” I said, facing them, back to the door, “and we’re gonna have a problem.”

Both were taller than me, and looked like they were in decent shape under those garish threads. So they were at first surprised and then amused.

“That cunt’s your sister?” the blond squeaked.

I kept my back to the door and they were crowded together, still scoping me out before starting much less finishing anything. And maybe trying to figure out how to beat the shit out of me in such cramped conditions. They had to do it here — out in the club could mean trouble. Taking it outside could mean cops. Nobody wanted that, including me.

“That cunt,” I said, “is my sister. Have you had enough fun with her? Copped enough feels?”

“Fuck you, Charlie,” the denim-hat dude said.

I said, “Duly noted.” I looked at his friend. “That your opinion, too?”

The blond squeaked some more. “We didn’t do a goddamn fucking thing she didn’t beg for, man! And I don’t think she’s your sister, either. You’re just sticking your nose in where it don’t the fuck belong.”

“Fine. But are you done hassling the chick or not?”

The denim-hat guy balled a fist and raised it to chest level and the blond stepped back to give him room and I whipped the nine mil from my waistband and pointed it at him.

The blond swallowed, goggling at me. “Maybe he *is* her brother, Willy.”

Willy didn’t have time to ponder that because I cuffed him alongside the head with the Browning barrel. His eyes rolled back like he was coming and his feet went out from under him and his cap flew off and he hit his head on the sink as he went down and landed in an ungainly pile, wiping up poorly aimed urine from the floor with his ugly apparel. The denim cap was floating in the crapper.

“You *fucker!*” the blond said, looking down at what I’d done. But he wasn’t coming at me. He was just concerned about his friend and probably afraid. He really wasn’t a threat at this point.

I smacked him alongside the head with the nine mil barrel

anyway. Some lessons can't be learned secondhand. He knocked back against the pebbled window and slid bumpily down past the sill till he was sitting on the floor with his knees up, since the space his unconscious friend was taking up made it impossible to do otherwise.

Both were out, trickles of scarlet down their left cheeks. They would have made a great subject for a black-and-white art photograph. But what they were was two more shits in this toilet.

I slipped out, shutting them in but knowing they'd be quickly found.

Becky was just exiting the ladies and she smiled and laughed a little when she saw me. "Fancy meetin' you here, honey."

"None of us are above nature's call," I said. "May I show you something?"

Confused, she nonetheless said, "Well, sure."

"All I ask is that if you disapprove, you don't alert what's-his-name, the bartender, till I've been gone five minutes or till somebody else finds them."

"Finds who?"

I pushed the men's room door open.

She gasped, a pink-nailed hand flying to her mouth. "Oh my!" And then she giggled again. "Did you do that for little ol' me?"

That's what she said. Sue me.

"I just wanted to elevate your opinion of the male sex. Have I succeeded?"

"Sure as shit have, honey."

I shut the men's room door; they weren't stirring yet. "I better slip out. Where can I meet you?"

"Just wait outside. I'll take off work now. Lou won't give a damn."

I did that, hoping she wasn't suckering me. Shortly I was standing on the sidewalk, thinking maybe I'd really screwed the pooch here, and that the bartender would emerge with a sawed-off or a baseball bat and I'd be off to the St. Louie pokey and out twenty-five grand.

But only she came out, her eyes big and wild as she said, "Somebody just found the jerks. We better shake a tail feather."

I followed her, because she was on the move, not that she moved very far. She opened the same door between the bar and the hippie dress shop that I'd come out of — the door to the stairs up to Boyd's lookout pad.

I asked, "Where are you...?"

"Honey, I told you I had somewhere we could go. My apartment's upstairs. Third floor."

Howdy neighbor.

Disconcertingly, the apartment was so similar to Boyd's, he might have emerged from his bedroom to greet us, or maybe shoot us. The furniture was damn near identical, suggesting both apartments were outfitted for rental at the same time, again probably the early '60s. Really, the major difference was no couch cushion and bed pillow had been moved near the far right window for Boyd to look out at the target. No binoculars or portable radio, either.

She led me through the boxcar layout to the kitchen. I sat at a Formica-topped table identical to the one where Boyd and I had conversed, what, an hour and a half ago? Or was that a lifetime? Still in her white blouse and black pants, she remained in waitress mode.

"How about some Sanka?" she said. "I have instant. No caffeine to keep you up all night."

We'd apparently run through all the "up" double entendres.

"Sure."

"You want a doughnut? I got a couple doughnuts from this mornin' that ain't too stale yet."

"Okay."

She gave me a glazed doughnut on a napkin and did the same for herself, and soon we were nibbling them and having the fake coffee.

Eyes just a little tight, she asked, "What did you do to them two boys?"

The nine mil was still in my waistband, the windbreaker zipped.

"Just took 'em to the woodshed," I said, hoping that phrase would resonate with this slightly Southern-sounding girl. "Nice pad."

"Yeah, it come furnished. I ain't been here long enough to apply any girly touches yet."

"How long *have* you been here?"

"In this apartment? Or this here town?"

"Both."

She shrugged, smirky-smiled. "Well, I guess it's the same answer either way. I moved to town and into this place three weeks ago."

Christ, about the same time as Boyd.

"Where are you from, Becky?"

"Down South."

"Where down south?"

Georgia? Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi...?

She nibbled doughnut. "Poplar Bluff."

"What state?"

"Well, Missouri." She pronounced it miz-ur-ah.

"So... from the Southern part of the state."

Her eyes popped a little, at how dumb I was sounding. "Uh, yeah."

"What prompted the move?"

"Some of us went to high school together decided to come up here where the job opportunities was better. Poplar Bluff, it's the 'Gateway to the Ozarks,' so-called. About all it's got's some tourist industry, which means waitressin' for a girl like me."

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Yeah, Jack, I *know* I'm waitressin' now, but that's just temporary. Till I get my feet under me. The bunch of us that moved north, the fellas all have decent factory jobs."

"Cool," I said.

She finished her Sanka and carried the empty cup to the sink. I handed her my still half-filled one and she put it there, too.

"You mind if I take a shower, Jack?"

"Not at all."

"Just wait for me there in the bedroom off the livin' room, okay?"

"Okay. Should I... get undressed?"

The lush sticky-pink lips smirky-smiled again. "Why? You prefer just unzippin' and whippin'?"

And she flounced out. Apparently that was a rhetorical question.

I went into the bedroom and climbed out of the windbreaker, kind of wrapping the nine mil in it. Set it on the dresser. Then I got undressed and turned off the overhead light, switching the nightstand lamp on to the lowest of its three settings. The effect was very soft, low-key, almost dreamy. The drilling of the shower water in the background reminded me of the naked woman under the spray. Then it stopped. I could hear her moving in there, toweling off I guess.

The bedroom off the bathroom she'd left dark, and she emerged from that darkness like a pale vision with all that red hair framing her face and the carrot-colored tangle below. The plump, round breasts had large tips as red as her hair, aureole just a little pinker than the pale pink flesh. Her shoulders and upper chest were freckled, her waist tucking in, her hips flaring out. She couldn't be much older than twenty-two or — three, but her ripe figure was womanly in the best sense.

She stood there posed in the doorway, legs unembarrassedly apart, the light from the bathroom providing her with an outline.

She said, "Are you clean, Jack? I'm clean. No diseases or nothin'."

"I don't even have a cold," I said, under the covers, tenting them.

"I mean, I got some rubbers in that drawer there, if you want. But I'm on the pill, honey. I trust you if you trust me."

That may not sound romantic to you, but to the part of me that was doing the thinking at the moment, it was sheer poetry.

She strolled over like a nudist carhop and looked down at me, where the blankets were in tee-pee formation. She flicked the covers away, twanging my hard-on, which made a motion at her like a

summoning finger. She crawled on the bed kittenish or was that panther-like and stopped between my legs and looked up at me wickedly, then descended on my cock like she was famished. I gave her an inch and she took a mile, and I was slicker than a rain-swept highway when she stopped short of getting an even bigger mouthful and said, “Now you do me.”

She flopped onto her back and spread her legs, knees up. I was new to red-haired muff but eager to learn. The tuft was softer and less coarse than any I’d encountered, and her pink-nailed fingers spread red lips apart to expose inner flesh that was redder still. Just when I had her licked, she told me to stick it in and I did. She was hot, wet and tight. I plunged in and out, deeper and faster, as her hips lifted and churned and lifted and churned, at first very slow, then less so, building to a frantic dizzying finish. I came so hard I practically passed out. She stared at the ceiling, breathing hard, her red-flushed chest gradually returning to freckled pale.

Then she grabbed some Kleenex from a box on the dresser, stuffed them between her legs and trotted comically out, her legs tight, her bottom jiggling. I used some of the Kleenex myself, then I got dressed.

I was sitting on the couch in the living room, the windbreaker-wrapped nine mil beside me. I was still getting my goddamn breath. She padded in, in sheer panties and nothing else, and plopped next to me, red hair bouncing. I gave her a little kiss and she gave me one back. Then she yawned.

“You wanna spend the night, Jack?”

“No. Better not.”

“Where you stayin’?”

“Not far from here.”

She got up, drifted to the window, so very beautiful. She parted drapes as sheer as her panties and looked out. “You know what, Jack?”

“What, Becky?”

“Somethin’ bad’s gonna happen to that nigger over there.”

Four

Boyd and I had breakfast at a diner called the Majestic, a surprising walk back into the 1950s for a business district that was otherwise an assemblage of hippie-ish shops — antiques, books, witchcraft, candles, chocolates, drug paraphernalia.

I was having corned beef hash, Boyd a bowl of oatmeal. I had my coffee black, he had cream and sugar.

"What did you say to *that*?" he asked, his dark eyes alarmed in their long-lashed, oddly pretty setting. That's not to imply he looked effeminate or anything — more like a Greek grocer taking a break from unloading a truck in an alley.

"Well," I told him with a shrug, stopping a forkful of hash halfway to my face, "I said, 'What nigger?' "

It was the kind of place where you could get a very dirty look for using a word like that, but we were in a corner booth with nobody in the adjacent one or at a nearby table, either.

"Quarry, just give me a summary. I don't expect blow by blow."

"So I should skip how she blew me? Probably wise. In bad taste, and might spoil your meal."

"Get bent. What? Are we in trouble?"

I shrugged again. Had a sip of coffee. "I honestly don't know. She's not stupid, but I don't read her as smart enough to be one of us. Or that good an actress. Just a chick who made a racist remark, and who — when I asked what she was talking about — said the, uh... black gentleman across the street was getting 'too big for his britches.' "

"She didn't say that. Not in those words."

"Sure she did. Well, not the 'black gentleman' part. I told you she was from a place called Poplar Bluff."

He'd stopped eating, and if he leaned over farther, he'd be crawling across the table knocking plates and cups off. "Quarry, what's your *read*?"

"Seems to be a coincidence. She's in the apartment above us, and I ran into her working at the bar next door."

He sat back heavily. "I fucking hate coincidences."

"And what, I love them? I think she's just a good-looking hick from downstate. If she isn't, I can only think of one possibility."

I made him ask. I'm kind of a prick that way.

"What possibility, Quarry?"

A cute blonde waitress in an old-fashioned green uniform refilled my coffee. She smiled at me and I just nodded. I'd already got in enough trouble.

When she was elsewhere, I said, “Maybe whoever hired us, through the Broker, installed Becky What’s-It to keep an eye on us. To... well, not to supervise exactly. Just keep an eye.”

Now he drank some coffee. “I suppose that’s possible. Never ran into her before on the stairs or anything... but possible. Her being a little bigot, what do you make of that?”

I sighed. Admitted, “Well, I don’t like it. Her presence implies she’s part of some racist bunch who maybe hired us and she got assigned to watch us, or help provide back-up we didn’t request. Could even mean our client intends to pull a double-cross.”

“Shit. But what could some little hillbilly gal do?”

“Ask Bonnie Parker.”

“Shit,” he said again.

“I got onboard because the Broker said this wasn’t really political *or* racial. Assured me that our subject is a bad boy who’s diddling his own people.”

His eyes lifted ceiling-ward. “Oh, fucking please! Don’t go getting self-righteous on me again. You with a conscience makes me sick. It’s like John Wayne sticking up for the Indians.”

“Stop bitching and think, Boyd. If we’re doing a job for a bunch of racists... if *that’s* what this job is about... it changes everything.”

“Does it? Tell me. Is the way the money spends any different?”

“No, but the attention level is. Suddenly everybody’s looking into this from the chief of police to the ghost of J. Edgar Hoover. It’s on the evening news every day for weeks, on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, until they find... who? The ones that did it.”

He was shaking his head. “We’ll be long gone.”

“Maybe. Normally. But I’m going undercover today, and people will see my face and post-game there will be police sketch artists talking to staffers and Christ knows what all. Wanting to know all about their fellow staffer who came on recently and then up and disappeared. Right after the tragedy.”

He stroked his mustache with a thumb and forefinger; he did that sometimes, when he was actually thinking.

Then he said, “No offense, Quarry, but your face is about as memorable as a mannequin. Still, however this goes down, *whoever* hired it, the cops and probably feds’ll be all over it.” Very quietly he said, “The next Martin Luther King, remember?”

I shook my head. “Maybe for a day or two. But they’ll dig in and come up with drugs and organized crime, fucking quick, and the manhunt for the Reverend’s ‘slayer’ will go back-burner so fast, you’ll get a nosebleed.”

He thought about it. Sipped some coffee. Thought some more. “You’re right. If he’s dirty, it’ll come out, whoever hired it done.”

Now I thought about it. Sipped. Thought some more. “Maybe. Maybe.”

“You think we should bail?”

“Not sure yet.”

The black caterpillars that were his eyebrows rose. “What about your *Hee-Haw* honey?”

I pushed my plate away, half-eaten. “I’ll stay in touch with her sweet little ass. I don’t know if she’s keeping an eye on us or not, but I’ll sure as shit keep an eye on her.”

“But, Quarry,” Boyd said with sarcastic mock-concern, “how can you fuck her now that you know she doesn’t like black people? Doesn’t it just sicken you?”

“You know what would sicken me? Details of *your* love life. Just like mine would sicken you.”

He didn’t argue the point. I let him pay and then we walked back. Back to our apartment below Becky’s.

Just after nine A.M., I entered the office of the St. Louis Civil Rights Coalition, where in a space three times as long as it was wide, a group of people ranging in age from twenty to fifty were at beat-up mismatched desks on phones or at old typewriters or up and around bustling from here to there, usually with clipboard in hand. A chattering teletype was going along one wall near three four-drawer files; the opposite wall had a fold-up banquet table of coffee and refreshments. At the rear were a pair of glassed-in offices at left and right, with restrooms between. The walls bore more *McGovern for President* posters but also some for a black guy named Bill Clay who was running for re-election to the House of Representatives.

The racial makeup of this group was a little surprising — perhaps only a third were black, although that sub-group was of varied age while the whites were mostly college kids or recent grads. Some of them may have been at that bar last night. What unified them was clothing. In my limited imagination, I had figured I’d walk into something out of *Shaft* or *Superfly* — wild colors, African prints, tie-dye, Dashikis — but this was a world instead of conservative black or brown suits with ties on the males, and conservative pantsuits for the females, with only the occasional splash of color from a blouse. Solid colors, though: yellow, navy, deep red. No flower-power prints.

Just three steps in and I felt out of place, though I was following exactly what the Broker had suggested — coming in wearing a light-blue Ban-Lon sportshirt, new jeans and Hush Puppies, plus the windbreaker (minus the nine-millimeter Browning).

“Casual but not sloppy,” he advised. “And then bring several business suits.”

But that was all he'd said on the subject.

On the other hand, Afros abounded, including some pseudoones on the white kids, though the more extreme examples were on the girls. Or rather women. Despite the predominance here of youth, nobody here looked very much like a "girl."

Also, nobody here was any kind of receptionist. I felt more like I'd wandered into a newsroom or maybe a horse-betting parlor. I saw the occasional eyes flick my way as a staffer passed on, headed to deal with something more important than a walk-in in fucking Hush Puppies.

Finally a young woman — twenty-five? — at a desk to my left hung up the phone and glanced at me. She had a full Afro that Angela Davis might have envied, big hoop earrings swinging out from under, with a maroon vest and matching pants, a navy-blue pointy-collar blouse beneath.

"Yes?" she said, as if I'd asked a question.

I stood before her like a naughty student at the teacher's desk with no apple in hand. "I'd like to apply."

A smile twitched on lips glossed dark red. Her skin was a rich caramel but her features were rather Caucasian, as if one parent had been from Nigeria and the other from Denmark. Her eyes were big and dark, her eye shadow dark too, the long lashes real. Or anyway real enough to fool me.

"Why?" she said coolly. "Did someone tell you we were hiring?"

"Sorry. I meant to say 'volunteer.' "

Eyebrows that were already arching arched some more. "Do I look like a recruiting sergeant?"

"No, you do not look like a recruiting sergeant. So then, *you're* a volunteer?"

My tone had been innocent — that took some effort I admit — and she was a little thrown.

She said, "No, actually I'm paid staff."

"Does it pay well?"

"...uh, not particularly."

"Makes sense."

The dark eyes flared. "It does?"

"Yeah. It never pays that well."

"What?"

"Humiliating people."

And I gave her a nice big smile, and a quick salute. "I'll just be going..."

"No! Excuse me. Sorry! *Young man!*"

I was already out on the sidewalk. But I was waiting, zipping up my windbreaker to make it look like I was doing something.

Then she was at my side. She was as tall as I was. Or anyway in those platform shoes she was.

"I didn't mean to be rude," she said, and sounded sincere enough.

"I'm not any younger than you."

"Huh?"

"You said, 'Young man.' Actually, you said, 'Young man!' Kind of like my third-grade teacher, who you remind me of a little, only her big hair was gray."

She just stared at me, like I'd thrown cold water in her face.

Then she started to laugh. Hard enough that she grabbed onto my sleeve. I am one fucking charmer.

Then, her laughter gone, replaced by mild embarrassment, she let go of my sleeve but stood fairly close. She had on a perfume I never smelled before, and it was nice. Spicy.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We're very busy right now, a lot going on, and I... didn't meant to be rude."

"No problem."

"Thank you. Shall we start over?"

"Why don't we skip the pleasantries and go right to where you sit at your desk and I sit in that empty chair alongside it, and you ask me all about myself?"

So we did that.

I told her my name was John Blake and that I'd been stateside for about two years following three tours in Vietnam, where I'd won the Bronze Star. That I'd joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War and participated in lots of demonstrations, everything from small protests to Operation RAW (Rapid American Withdrawal).

"I was never a paid staffer," I told her. "Just another grunt. I inherited my folks' farm in Idaho and sold it, so I'm still fairly flush. I can afford to indulge my conscience for a while."

She was nodding, listening intently, really buying in. "Why did you leave VVAW?"

I shrugged. "Membership is shrinking. With the Paris Peace Talks and all, a lot of guys figured they'd made their point, and booked it. Felt we'd won the peace in a war that didn't give us many victories."

"And what brought you to us?"

"I'm an admirer of Reverend Lloyd. And when I heard he was out drumming up votes for George McGovern, well, hell... I figured, I'm in."

"Staunch McGovern man?"

The only reason I would have voted for McGovern, if I bothered voting (which I never did), was that any asshole off the street would be better than Tricky Dick.

"Oh yes," I said. "He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross,

you know. He's no pacifist. He understands military men, and knows how badly we were used."

She'd been taking some notes with a pencil on a yellow pad, but now she was tapping the eraser end on the desktop, studying me like a menu item that sounded too good to be true. But she was hungry enough to take a chance.

"Mr. Blake," she said, starting to rise, "could you wait here a moment?"

"Sure. And it's Jack."

She smiled. My God, she was lovely. Like a Swedish girl dipped in milk chocolate. Down boy.

"And I'm Ruth. Ruth Wright."

"Hi Ruth."

"Hello, Jack."

She went off and I made a point of not checking out her ass, wanting to make a good impression. Just the same, I felt eyes come up for momentary appraisals, the suspicion in here like the heat up a notch too high. Funny thing, none of those skeptical glances came from the black staffers, only the white ones. Scratch a hippie and find a selfish spoiled brat, I always say. Well, not out loud.

One black staffer was a little older, mid-thirties anyway. He was tall, skinny, pockmarked. He was drifting around the room, either loafing or supervising. It's hard to tell the difference.

Then Ruth was walking briskly toward me down the central aisle between desks — which otherwise were arranged in a scattered way, since being uptight was a sin — and she was beaming.

"Would you walk this way?" she asked.

I'll skip the talcum powder joke because she didn't have a hip-swaying stride, just a confident one.

I followed her back to the glassed-in offices. We stopped outside the one at left, but didn't go right in. In the short time it had taken her to collect me, the man behind the desk — gray metal and new-looking — had taken a phone call. He was sturdy-looking, ebony-skinned and cueball bald, head shaved maybe, Isaac Hayes-style. His oval face was home to heavy eyebrows over wide-set eyes, a flat-bridged nose bulging at the tip, and a rather small mouth dominated by a thick mustache. His off-the-rack suit was black and so was his tie.

While we waited, I glanced at the office at right, and there he was, at his own new gray-metal desk, hunkered over reading a typewritten page from a stack of them. He was one handsome son of a bitch, with a very short Afro and mahogany skin that suited the strong, carved features of his face. His suit and tie were black too, but his was a tailored number, and the neckwear was silk.

Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd.

Meanwhile back where I was cooling my heels, the bald bigwig (that doesn't sound right, somehow) behind glass was hanging up the phone with one hand and motioning us to come in with the other.

I held the door open for my attractive escort, shut the door behind us, and the almost burly man behind the desk rose and grinned as big as his little mouth would allow, stretching a hand across the desk for me to shake. I did. He had a no-nonsense grip, fleshy but strong.

"Mr. Blake," he said, in a resonant bass, sitting back down, "a pleasure. I'm Harold Jackson. The Reverend's chief administrative assistant."

That translated to "secretary," but I didn't point it out.

"Mr. Jackson," I said with a nod.

We sat, too.

"Ruth has filled me in," he said. "And I have to say you bring impressive credentials."

"I do?" The only physical credentials I brought were my fake driver's license and a phony V.A. hospital card.

He nodded, still smiling, his manner very pleasant. "You fill a specific need in this campaign... and that's what it is, a campaign to put an anti-war candidate in the White House."

"Mr. Jackson," I said, "do you really think that's possible? Or are we tilting at windmills? Don't the polls have Nixon way ahead?"

He was already nodding. "They do. But the college crowd, and others in that freshly enfranchised voting bloc of under-twenty-one-year-olds, can defy every prediction, every statistician. We could be looking at the biggest upset since Truman beat Dewey."

I nodded knowingly. Well, I'd seen the picture of Truman holding up a newspaper saying the other guy won, hadn't I?

"What can I do?" I asked. "Understand I'm not asking for any responsibility, walking in off the street like this. Make a gofer out of me. I can run errands as well as the next schlub."

But again he was shaking his head before I'd finished, the fluorescent lighting above him reflecting off the top of his skull, damn near making me wince.

He said, "Mr. Blake, you're too valuable a resource for that kind of thing. Man, you're a war hero. A Bronze Star! That's really something."

"I didn't think war was very popular around here."

"Not real popular, no. But war heroes who come back and take a stand against that Asian debacle, they are in short supply."

"Oh. That's the specific need that I fill."

Ruth, who was sitting forward and staring at me through all this, very admiringly, said, "Have you done any public speaking?"

"No," I said. "Not my strong suit."

That was the last thing I needed — making a speech at a Lloyd rally and getting my picture taken. In the papers, maybe!

She was saying, "I can help you. We can develop the speech together, something very short and to the point. Nice and punchy."

"Now, Ruth," Jackson said, frowning, "let's not scare our young friend off on his first day."

She shrugged, glancing from me to him and back again. "Well, even if we just introduce him to the crowd, from the front row of the audience... or perhaps he could be up on the dais with the Reverend."

"No," I said, "that kind of thing freaks me out."

Again, a photo opportunity I did not need.

"But, Jack," she said, "it would have such great impact if—"

"You're going to college campuses," I said. "All they'll hear is Vietnam vet and Bronze Star and the boos and 'baby killer's will start. It'll backfire. Trust me."

This time Jackson was nodding before I finished, coming in with, "I agree with Mr. Blake."

"Make it 'Jack,' " I said.

"Jack it is," he said with his big small smile.

But he didn't instruct me to call him Harold or Harry, either.

"Now here's how we'll use you," Jackson said, his bass going into a commanding mode, "if you're agreeable, sir."

"Not 'sir,' " I said, grinning. "I'm an enlisted man."

That got a booming laugh out of him. Ruth managed a strained smile.

What he had in mind was putting me to work at the phones. Ruth and I would come up with canned material that had me introducing myself as a Vietnam vet campaigning for the anti-war McGovern. We'd work that up this afternoon and I'd start in later today or tomorrow. I said that sounded fine.

They can't take your picture on the phone.

"Also," he said, "you will travel with us to these college campuses in the coming days. You'll be in the audience, and the Reverend — assuming he agrees with this tactic — will mention you. Will talk up your presence and gesture to the audience, and everybody will applaud. But you won't come forward or acknowledge it."

"The Reverend might get booed off the stage for it," I said.

Ruth smiled. "Nobody boos the Reverend."

"Should you happen to spot someone in the audience," Jackson said, "who you can identify as a Vietnam vet... are there ways?"

"Sometimes," I said. "Clothing, usually. Sometimes a placard. You know."

"Well, in that case you go up to them, identify yourself and shake

hands and go, ‘Right on, brother.’ That cool with you, Jack?”

“Cool, Mr. Jackson.”

We talked for another fifteen minutes, and just before Ruth and I went out to get started on developing my phone spiel, Jackson said, “We’ll get you some quality time with the Reverend. I think he’s going to take to you, Jack. Take to you just fine.”

I said, “Thank you, sir.”

“No ‘sir’ necessary.” He lifted the big mustache with a small half-smile. “I was an enlisted man myself. Korea.”

As we exited the office, I heard muffled arguing across the way. A very handsome black woman in a fall coat and hat was standing in front of Lloyd’s desk, leaning toward him, gloved hands on the desktop. Now and then she thrust a finger out at the bullpen of staffers. He wasn’t saying much, though I had a hunch when he did, it was, “Now, dear…” You couldn’t pick out what she was saying, but you didn’t have to.

She was pissed.

“What’s that all about?” I asked Ruth.

“That’s Mrs. Lloyd,” she said. “Marianne.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

She shook her head. “Don’t ask. Please don’t ask.”

But there was an interesting quaver to her voice.

Five

A different band was on stage at the Euclid Bar and Grill, a better one. Right now they were playing "Down by the River," a nice job of it, though I could have done without the lead singer's over-the-top Neil Young impression. It was closing time — two A.M., according to the bar clock, really one-forty.

I'd spent the afternoon working out my phone spiel with Ruth, which had taken about an hour, the rest of the time at a desk making calls, going through a list of registered Democratic voters. A lot of the time nobody was home, but those who were — usually housewives or college kids in apartments — were mostly friendly. A handful just hung up on me. A few insisted Nixon was getting out of Vietnam, and I pointed out it was taking him better than his four years in office getting that done, reminding them he'd got elected on his "secret plan" to get out of the Nam soup. A plan, yes, but the secret was four more years of war. And now he wanted four more years in the White House.

The whole Nixon thing actually came out of my brain, astounding me. I guess I knew more about what was going on than I thought I did. Thanks, John Chancellor. And here I'd thought the NBC nightly news was just background noise while I ate something off a TV tray.

I'd arranged to pick Becky up at the bar after she got off work, then spent the earlier evening watching television with Boyd. I picked up a pepperoni pizza at a place called Culpepper's and we were eating slices off napkins — no TV trays — while *The Odd Couple* was on.

He grinned at me during one commercial. "I'm starting to feel like *we're* the Odd Couple."

"Me, too. You be the 'odd.' "

Remarks like that usually made him laugh. This time his half-hearted "ha" barely qualified.

Next commercial, he said, "You're going out with that little jig-hating twat, huh?"

"Yeah. I want to see what's she up to. Also maybe fuck her again."

"Well, at least you have a plan."

Me and Nixon.

After Johnny Carson, I'd gone down to the bar and found a place to stand and lean. No booth tonight — it was more crowded than last night, chatter, laughter, packed dance floor. I went wild and had a draw Falstaff. I was in the same clothes I'd worn earlier, when I volunteered at the Coalition HQ, including the windbreaker. The only change in my wardrobe was the nine millimeter in my waistband in

back.

I'd brought it along for two reasons. First, those knuckleheads from last night might be back to get even, and of course all they'd get was more of the same. Second, I wasn't sure what to make of Becky, beyond her bedroom skills, and till I found out what she was up to, I needed something hard and long in my pants that wasn't doing my thinking for me.

Now and then she would stop and say something cute or sexy and go on about her business. The smokiness and neon lighting gave a guy alone at the bar a nice anonymity. Shocking as it seems, no girl hit on me. I just drank my beer — well, actually two of them — and mostly enjoyed the band. After they played "Ohio," about the college kids getting killed by the National Guard, a bunch of applause rang out. I assumed these kids weren't applauding the Guard, but in this town who could say.

By a quarter after two (really five till), the patrons had filed out, and the trio of waitresses had cleaned up — tabletops wiped down, chairs on tables — and cashed out with the bartender. Becky came over and looped her arm in mine. Beaming up at me as we stepped out onto the sidewalk. Cool night but not quite cold.

"Shall we?" she asked, leading me to the door between hippie dress shop and bar.

I paused. "Isn't there somewhere after-hours I can take you? If not a club, Denny's, or a Sambo's maybe?"

She shook her head and all that red cotton candy bounced, her hand on the door handle. "No thanks, honey, I'm too sweaty and smoky for that. But I could fix us a little somethin'."

"Haven't you done enough waiting on people for one night?"

"I don't mind. I'll take a shower and wash the crud off, and then maybe, I don't know... maybe see what comes up?"

I laughed like I hadn't heard that a thousand times and followed her up the stairs, not pausing at all on the little landing at the door to the stakeout pad. Up on her landing, she used her key and I followed her in and they jumped me.

Two of them, a tall skinny one and a tall not-skinny one, one on either side, grabbing me by the arms and hauling me in, then hurling me to the carpet. I rolled over and looked up at them.

They were in tan workshirts, tan chinos and brown work boots; short hair, no sideburns. Blank oval faces, though the skinny one's was more narrow, his hair dark brown, while the other guy, who might have been a linebacker, had a Kirk Douglas cleft chin and the blond hair to go with it.

Neither one had a gun, but the linebacker had a blackjack in his right hand, having grabbed me with his left. Now he was tapping it

against his leg, gently.

"We're taking you to talk to somebody, mister," he said.

He was maybe twenty-three. The skinny one, no older, was going over to the couch where several loops of rope were waiting, also some duct tape. Becky was standing at the open doorway to her bedroom, looking like she might cry, hugging herself like it was cold in here.

"Taking me where?" I asked, sitting up. "For what?"

He lifted the blackjack and waggled it like a finger. "Just stay put. We're gonna tie you up. You might could live through this."

He had that same faint Southern twang as Becky.

I said, "That's might encouraging."

He frowned, smart enough to know I was mocking him. But I had a hunch that was the extent of his smarts.

"Just you cooperate," he said. "Somebody wants to talk to you."

"You said that before. Becky! Honey. This your way of paying me back for sticking up for you last night?"

She said nothing, looked away.

"Becky is with us," the linebacker said, like I didn't know that. "She told us how you roughed up them creeps last night, and she's grateful. But we got to be careful. If you're who you might be, you'll understand."

Only I didn't understand.

The skinny one had collected the rope and was coming over to me.

That was enough. I whipped out the nine millimeter, now that they were close enough together to get them both without half-trying.

They froze, goggling at me. The linebacker dropped the blackjack and I hadn't even asked him to. The skinny one, his jaw dangling, let go of the coils of rope and they hit the carpet like dead snakes.

Becky turned to bolt through the bedroom and to her back I said, "You can give that a try, honey. I *might* not shoot you."

And in truth I might not — a gunshot would put an end to this job before it began, and I was still somewhat enamored with the idea of making twenty-five grand.

In any case, she froze, and turned toward me, putting her hands up like a cashier in a convenience store robbery.

My reluctance to shoot at all in these circumstances was the reason these two clean-cut assholes were still breathing. It would really piss me off to come all the way to St. Louis and take out two or three people and not get anything out of it but a minimal kill fee from the Broker.

I was on my feet now. Like Becky, these two had their hands up, unbidden. The skinny one was shaking like Jerry Lewis in *Scared Stiff*.

"Here's what we're going to do," I said. "Becky, sweetie — over

here... That's right. Don't be nervous. Just come over. That's fine, right there. Now, take those coils of rope, one at a time, and tie your friends' hands behind their backs."

She squinted at me like I was speaking Latvian.

"You heard me," I said, not nasty. "I need really good strong knots, tight enough that your boyfriends can't slip out of them. I'll be *checking* now."

She swallowed, nodding.

I waited while she followed orders.

"Good," I said. "Now, give them each a duct-tape gag. Just a decent strip to cover the mouth."

She did that, too.

"Fellas," I said, "sit on the couch. Leave some space between you."

They went over and did that. Those ropes had been intended to tie both my hands and feet, but I'd had to settle just for their hands.

Becky was standing four or five feet from me, by now looking more embarrassed than afraid. I directed her to an easy chair near the couch. Then I stomped on the floor three times, hard. My seated company reacted with popping eyes, and the ungagged Becky made a kind of yelp. Nothing that would attract attention.

I went over to the door and opened it. I could hear footsteps pounding up the carpeted stairs. My curly-headed, mustached partner and his long-barreled S & W .38 rolled in. He was in a paisley sportshirt and brown trousers and nicely shined shoes — he'd known he might have to come visiting, and he wasn't about to do that in his underwear or jammies, despite the hour.

"You rang?" he said, shutting the door behind him. Three foot stomps had been the signal.

"She sold me out," I said, nodding to Becky, whose expression turned hurt, and then gestured with my nine mil to the duct-tape twins and said, "Those two grabbed me and were going to take me somewhere."

"Where?"

"We haven't got to that."

"Then why gag the fuckers?"

"Because my sweetie here will be more talkative. And she's coming with me."

Her eyebrows went up.

Then, at my direction, all us went out to go down the stairs to the apartment below, the two denim-clad dopes in front with me (and the nine mil); next, Boyd squeezing down side by side with Becky, holding her by an arm while he shoved the .38 in her tummy.

The guy in the lead, the road company Kirk Douglas, tried to

make a break for it, thinking his buddy would take any bullet. Might have worked if he'd have waited till we got to the landing of our apartment below, but he panicked and tried it halfway there, and as soon as he made his move, I kicked his pal in the ass and sent him tumbling to knock into the linebacker and they got tangled up in each other rolling down, winding up in a comical pile on the landing.

Boyd handed the girl off to me — she had a deer-in-headlights expression — and stepped around the two interwoven idiots who were moaning through their duct-tape, and pushed open the door he'd left ajar. He dragged them inside by the ankles, one at a time, and we followed, Becky first.

I shut us in.

The two boys weren't unconscious from the fall — it was only a half a floor's worth of carpeted stairs — but both were moaning and whimpering, in their muffled way, on their backs now like upturned bugs. Boyd patted each man down, came up with nothing much — no I.D. or gun or knife, and of course the blackjack had been left behind — though some car keys turned up in the skinny one's pants.

I took those, and said to Becky, whose arm I was still holding onto, "They wanted to take me to see somebody. Do you know who?"

She nodded.

"Do you know where?"

She nodded.

"Can you drive me there?"

That she had to think about.

"Becky. Can you drive me there?"

She swallowed. Tears were welling. But she nodded.

Our living room was set up the same as theirs — I'd instructed Boyd to disassemble his lookout perch, anticipating this company — so soon the blond linebacker and his skinny friend were both seated on the couch, tied hands behind them, with Becky in the nearby easy chair.

I stood before them like we were playing charades and it was my turn. Boyd and his .38 were behind me, a little to my right, where he had a straight-on shot at the duct-tape duo.

I said to all three, "Like somebody said earlier, cooperate and you 'might could live through this.' My friend here is going to keep you company. Assuming you don't get stupid — that is *more* stupid, or in dipshit-ese, 'stupider' — he won't do anything but keep an eye on you until I get back... What happens *then*, you're wondering?"

Both of the duct-taped clowns nodded. It was so much in tandem that I had to laugh.

"Assuming I come back in good shape — and judging by your boss sending you fools to get me, that should be no problem — I'll let

you fellas go back to whatever hayloft or outhouse you crawled out of. After that, I won't kill you unless I see you. Fair enough?"

They actually nodded. Not quite in tandem, though, so it fell short of chuckle-worthy.

Boyd went over and turned on his radio to that easy listening station, where Buddy Greco was singing "The Lady is a Tramp," and turned it up fairly loud. Not loud enough to cover a gunshot, maybe, but helpful if that came up; besides, the bar below was empty and so, obviously, was the apartment above. He pulled a chair around and sat facing them, crossing his legs, wiggling his right foot to the rhythm.

I nodded to Becky to get up and she did, then walked her through the boxcar room layout.

In the kitchen, I dangled the keys and said, "You know what wheels these go to?"

"Uh-huh."

"Can you drive me?"

"Uh-huh."

"Do you believe I'll shoot you if you try anything smart?"

"...Uh-huh."

"Even try anything dumb, Becky, I'll shoot you. I'll be sorry. I'll feel terrible about it in the morning. But you'll be fucking dead, understood?"

"Uh-huh."

"No tears! I like you. I know our relationship will probably not recover from this hiccup, but I do not want to hurt your pretty ass, even if I've lost access to it. Ready?"

"Uh-huh."

Six

We went out the back onto the shallow wooden deck with stairs down to where several cars were parked on the gravel inset. One was my cobalt Chevy Impala, and we could have taken that, but I preferred arriving in a vehicle that was expected.

What Becky led me to was a piece of shit tan mid-'60s Ford Falcon. The best you could say for it was that it was recently washed and not beat up. I unlocked it, opened the driver's door and she climbed in, then I got in on the other side and handed her the keys. The gun was in my front waistband now, windbreaker unzipped.

"Take me where we're going," I said.

She tried nothing smart or dumb on the half-hour ride. For fifteen minutes, we didn't speak.

Finally I asked her, "Why did you call your friends in? Besides seeing me go in the apartment downstairs from you."

"You know why," she said, poutily, driving carefully. Traffic was light but it was a drunk time of night.

"Maybe I do. Give me a hint, though."

"...Way you handled them numbnuts last night."

"Yeah?"

"I mean," she said, shrugging behind the wheel, "you really hurt 'em. Bigger than you, and you left 'em there... bleedin' and shit."

"I didn't like the way they put their hands on you."

"Thanks for that much." She gave me a little smile, though her expression remained hurt, like she hadn't forgiven me yet for not trusting her.

I said, "You figured I wasn't just anybody."

"Right. It took *somebody* to handle them two like that."

"So who did you report it to?"

"You'll see."

No need to try to pry it out of her. She was right — I soon would see.

In a suburb called Ferguson, on a four-lane main drag mixing residential and commercial, she stopped at a light as we approached a little chapel-like church on the corner.

Out front was an old-fashioned black-with-white-letters message board:

SUNDAY SCRIPTURE:

"The Lord Defeated the Ethiopians."

Catercorner was a used-car lot and directly across an all-night Deep Rock station, then residential, houses built in the twenties and thirties that had seen better days. The light changed and then we were pulling into a little paved drive between the church and a slumbering Dairy Queen.

Behind the church she slowed to a stop in a gravel lot. Only one other car was parked back here, a white recent-model Lincoln with a Confederate flag decal in the back window and a WALLACE FOR PRESIDENT bumper sticker.

I said to her, "A fucking church?"

She nodded. "You shouldn't say it that way. It's sacrilegious."

"Sorry. I meant to say goddamn church. This explains the two choir boys you brought to see me."

She glared at me. "You *said* bring you here. And he *is* a Christian leader."

The only thing remotely Christian about this girl was that I'd screwed her in the missionary position.

I came around and opened her door, collected the keys from her, and walked her by the arm to the church's back door, which was unlocked. Then we were in a little entry area lighted by a small bare bulb with a pull chain. A few uncarpeted stairs led up into a dark sanctuary, some street light entering through stained-glass windows, revealing empty pews. Down to our right were more uncarpeted stairs, a flight of them. She nodded that way.

Hell, not heaven, then.

We went down together, squeezed a bit as we shared the steps, which emptied into a linoleum-floored basement with folding banquet tables that had no doubt seen more than its share of potluck suppers. The fluorescent-light panels in the drop ceiling were off, but small rectangular windows let in enough street-level light to make things out.

At the far end, a wood-paneled wall had various framed Sunday school-type prints and also two doors; under the one at right, light seeped out.

She pointed to that door.

Someone behind it was waiting for me to be brought to him. But no other bully boys in tan work shirts and chinos were waiting here for me, unless they were back there with my would-be host. Or were a bunch of them sitting in the dark upstairs, crouched down in the pews where I hadn't seen them?

I led her down the central aisle between banquet tables and when we stood at the light-seeping door, I whispered, "Knock."

She gave it three short raps. “Mr. Starkweather? It’s Becky. I have him right here, sir.”

“Bring him!” came a radio announcer baritone. “Bring him right in.”

She reached for the knob, her eyes querying me and I nodded for her to go ahead. She did and we went in.

It was a decent-sized office, with more rec-room-type paneling and the same drop ceiling and fluorescent panels, though the latter were dark. The only illumination came from a steel flying-saucer-shade lamp with a grooved steel base on the wood-topped, military-green metal desk it rested upon. Many neat stacks of papers were on the desktop as well, beside a blotter and two phones.

Behind the oversize desk sat a medium-sized man in his craggy forties smoking a General MacArthur-style corncob pipe, harsh tobacco smoke hanging in the air like a filthy curtain. As had his minions, he wore a tan shirt but also a black tie, his black hair short-cropped, his complexion pale. A rectangular face bore carved features — cheekbones, slash of black eyebrows, sockets with lamb-dropping eyes, hawk nose, thin wide mouth, prominent jaw — an Indian-chief courtesy of a mediocre wood-carver.

In two seconds, I took it all in. On the wall behind him was an enormous sideways red flag with a swastika in a white circle — doesn’t every good church need a cross? — and left of that a framed print of the famous Sunday school Caucasian Jesus; at right was a framed original portrait in a smeary paint-by-numbers style of Adolph Hitler. A bookcase on the left side wall displayed German war souvenirs, helmets, knives, Lugers next to snazzy holsters; above was a display on blue velvet of Nazi medals.

Consuming the right side wall was an enormous framed black-and-white Korea-era photograph of the man at the desk in a Marine colonel’s dress uniform with a number of medals. A great American soldier who just happened to be president of the Hitler fan club.

His chin came up, and so did his pipe, as he said, “Rebecca — where are Sam and Dave?”

I felt like telling him “Muscle Shoals,” but doubted he’d get it.

“A friend of mine is babysitting them,” I said, answering for her. With the nine millimeter, I gestured to the two metal folding chairs opposite him. “Do you mind?”

His head bobbed curtly, pipe in his teeth. “Not at all.”

I directed Becky to sit, which she did. She was as nervous as on a trip to the principal’s office.

“My friend will kill both Sam and Dave,” I said, “and dump them, on a dusty road...” Another gag lost on him. “...if I’m not back safe and sound in about ninety minutes.”

"Understood," he said.

Her eyes white all around, Becky leaned forward and said, "I'm *so* sorry, sir. Dave and Sam did their best, but he... he had a *gun*."

"So I see," our host said with a nod to my nine-millimeter-in-hand.

Pleasantly, I asked, "What was it you wanted to see me about?"

"I would like to know your intentions."

"Well, Rebecca and I've only been out on one date, but I think it's going really well, so you can rest assured my intentions are honorable."

Becky winced at that. My host didn't react at all. Humor was either something he did not understand or at most something had learned to tolerate.

"Earlier today," he said, "Rebecca saw you enter an apartment below hers."

She turned to me and said, "I was coming down the stairs. You didn't see me."

"And this was after," the man with the corncob pipe said, "you had gone out of your way to make her acquaintance the night before. More than that, to impress her with your manhood."

Was he referring to me pistol-whipping those creeps, or to my impressive Rebecca-banging manhood? I didn't seek clarification.

Instead I asked, "What are you looking for me to say?"

He removed the pipe and looked at it, confirmed it had gone out and re-lit it with a kitchen match.

Puffing it, getting it going, he said, "I have stayed alive, Mr. Blake... that *is* your name, isn't it, or at least the name you're using? I have stayed alive lo these many years — where others with a similar courage of their beliefs have gone down in a hail of bullets — by exerting what may seem to some an excess of caution. Are you an interloper, sir? Or did you innocently stumble into something of which you knew nothing?"

I thought about killing him, but that meant killing Becky and Sam and Dave, too, for chump change.

"You know *my* name," I said. "Who are you?"

That surprised him. "You don't recognize me?"

"I don't get out that much."

"Or perhaps you have survived through caution, as well. The name is Starkweather — Commander Zachary Taylor Starkweather. You've heard of the White Christian Freedom Party? I'm its proud founder, as well as the Grand Dragon of the Missouri Ku Klux Klan."

I hadn't heard of him, but I knew about these screwball American Nazis. And I was fairly sure I had this thing figured out. Since I was the one with a gun, why not take a flier?

“I didn’t stumble into anything,” I said. “And neither did you.”

His mouth smiled around the pipe. “Is that right?”

“I was hired to do a job,” I said. “And when I work, there’s insulation. No direct contact with my employer. That’s designed not so much for my protection as for the one who hired me. Anyone on the hiring end, trying to lend support, is... misguided. Anyone on that end checking up on me is a damn nuisance. The wrong parties could get killed. Do I make myself clear?”

He drew in some of that foul smoke, then shared it with us. “You do, sir.”

“Delightful as her company is, I would like Becky here to vacate the apartment above where my partner and I are working. She can keep her job — jobs are tough to find — but she should stay with friends till she has somewhere else to live. And if I see either Sam or Dave, I will kill them and leave town. With the job unfinished.”

He nodded sagely. “Understood, sir. There was severe misjudgment on our end. Do forgive us.”

“Leave the forgiveness to Jesus. And the job to me.”

He nodded again, so low, it was almost a bow. Then he stood behind the desk — he was about my size — and extended a thick paw for me to shake. He was surrounded by the red of the Nazi flag.

I switched the nine mil to my left hand and stood and shook with him. His grip was cold and clammy but firm.

I said, “Come on, Becky. Let’s go get your friends out of hock.”

She and I were at the door when Starkweather said, “May I ask you one thing, Mr. Blake?”

“Okay.”

“In taking on this assignment, are you strictly, as they say, in it for the money? Or are you too a good Christian, who hates the niggers and kikes as much as we do?”

I gave him half a smile. “You left out the fags, Commander.”

“So I did! So I did.”

He was chuckling as I left.

I stuffed my nine millimeter in my waistband and slipped an arm around Becky’s shoulder and walked her out of the church and into the parking lot. Then I wiped off my hand where the madman had shook it and shuddered.

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” I said to myself.

“Please, not here,” she scolded.

“Amen,” I said.

And we got the hell out.

Seven

The next morning Boyd and I again got breakfast together, this time at a funky restaurant called Duff's in an old house with mismatched furniture, bizarre paintings, a purple ceiling, and waitresses in headbands. We found a quiet corner and had scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, coffee and further discussion about whether to bail.

"If this racist goon is our employer," I said, "he's about as stable as a two-legged table, and a prime candidate for a straitjacket."

"Ours not to reason why," Boyd said, but the frown lines under that curly dark fright wig of his said he was troubled, too.

"Complete that thought and get back to me," I said, chewing bacon. "If these morons figured that watching us, for whatever reason, was a good idea, it's at the very least a breach of protocol."

"But such good money," he whined.

He didn't know the half of it. Literally, since his ten grand was less than half of my twenty-five.

I said, "I'm calling the Broker."

He shrugged, bit off a corner of toast slathered with organic marmalade, and admitted, "Probably a good idea."

A couple of old-fashioned wooden phone booths were off the restaurant's bar area, which was hours away from being open. I closed myself inside one, sent a dime down the slot and told the operator the number and that it was a collect call. I expected I'd have to camp out since surely I'd get a flunky, with the return call from the man himself taking up to half an hour to happen.

But the Broker actually answered.

I told him I was in a hippie joint, so unless the feds were tapping the phones to find dissidents or drug dealers, it should be cool to talk. Of course an avalanche of euphemisms followed anyway.

"The guy who hired the job had people watching us," I said. "Whether to back us up should we need help or to double-cross us at the end, or just make sure we were earning our pay... I got no fucking idea."

"A shameful breach. My apologies. I'll talk to the party in question."

"I already have."

"*What?* You know this breaks the cardinal rule! Contact with the client is strictly out of bounds."

"Not when two of his people jump me it's not. They were gonna take me to the guy, under duress. I took care of them."

Alarm colored his voice. "You took *care* of them...?"

"Just temporarily. Then I called on who sent them myself. Told

him to call off his dogs."

"...I hope that will be enough."

"I don't know, Broker. I'm uncomfortable. So is Boyd. The contract's been broken. We should tell him as much, keep the down payment, and book it."

"Now, Quarry, just because our client was, shall we say, over-enthusiastic..."

"Our client, shall we say, is a fucking racist whack-job. You assured me this wasn't 'overtly' political, Broker, but I beg to disagree. This I didn't sign on for. This time, I would frankly rather fucking take the *client* out than the mark."

"Please restrain your use of language."

He wasn't objecting to "fucking," rather that I hadn't been euphemistic enough to suit him.

His baritone tried soothing me. "I believe you've made some false assumptions. However this may look, I assure you it is *not* a racial matter. Rather, as I said before, this pertains to certain unsavory matters."

A racial killing might seem fairly unsavory to you, but that word was the Broker's code for crime. He was in his arch way again assuring me that the target had placed himself in our crosshairs by way of his drug-dealing activities.

What the hell. Maybe the Commander of the Christian Nazi Dickwads was in business with certain black devils to fund his enterprises. Dumber shit has happened.

"If as a byproduct," he was saying, "distasteful prejudices of our client or associates of our client are *also* served, so be it."

How I would have liked to sit the Broker down across from Zachary Taylor Starkweather and let them pompous each other to death.

Tightly, I said, "Be that as it may, Broker — Boyd and I are uneasy."

A pause. Then: "Go on about your business, Quarry, but also ascertain whether this... well-intentioned but ill-advised surveillance, apparently initiated by our client, has ceased. If it has, continue with the commission."

Shit. Fuck. Hell.

"Okay," I said, against my better judgment. Of course, turning my nose up at twenty-five grand was also against my better judgment.

His tone shifted into a mundane business mode. "How long until you can set the date?"

That meant, how long before I could say what day the hit would go down. He wasn't referring to me marrying Boyd or a white-supremacist waitress.

I said, “I’m not hanging around those headquarters any longer than I have to. There are trips today and tomorrow, and I’ll get an idea of whether a change of locale is helpful or not.” This was Saturday. “I’m going to say mid-week. I’ll let you know specifically as soon as I can.”

“Good.”

This was important to all concerned, because the final and largest payment was made the day (usually night) before the hit. The client would set a time and place and almost always make the drop himself — with a hired killing, you don’t delegate the payoff. These arrangements were made through the Broker and the information passed on to Boyd and me.

“Obviously,” he said, “if at any point you feel the job has been compromised, you have my blessing to pull the plug. Just keep in mind, it’s a lucrative plug to pull.”

“That’s why I’m still here, Broker.”

We hung up and I rejoined Boyd, who was having a second cup of coffee.

“We’re still on,” I said, “for now.”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

Sometimes I could just slap him. He wasn’t on the firing line, like I was. The active half of a hit sometimes ran into fatal complications, but when did that ever happen to the passive half?

We walked back and I checked the apartment upstairs from us. It was locked but I opened the door with a credit card. My little waitress with the moist red muff and the hardcore black hate had packed up and moved out, leaving me with a mixed bag of memories.

So we’d go on with the job, as the Broker said. At the same time, I was working on an alternate plan, though not one I felt comfortable sharing with Boyd. Not yet. It was a plan that would be difficult to execute, so to speak, without risking my business arrangement with the Broker.

The thing was, I really, *really* would rather put a bullet in Commander Starkweather’s purported brain than take down that black guy across the street, hypocritical dope peddler though he may be.

Only... a guy in my business could not afford to be fussy or picky or any such shit where the clients were concerned. I fucking knew that. Like the targets, they were never stellar human beings.

But, goddamnit — Nazis just rubbed me the wrong way.

Normally — in the Impala or my Opel GT for instance — the drive from St. Louis, Missouri, to DeKalb, Illinois, would have taken maybe four and a half hours. But we were in a late ’40s-vintage former Greyhound bus, nicely refurbished though minus a lavatory, so

stops were fairly frequent. Factoring in that and a food stop, we were talking closer to six hours.

The McGovern rally would be this evening, and we would stay overnight at DeKalb before another six-hour trip back to Missouri for another rally. That would be tomorrow afternoon, in Kirksville at the teacher's college.

The big silver-and-blue bus was parked right outside the office and the engine was going, making a noise somewhere between a purr and a growl. On the vehicle's side, where a greyhound once leapt, the words ST. LOUIS CIVIL RIGHTS COALITION were painted, though the red circular STOP tail-light centered at the rear still bore the airborne canine and its liner's logo.

I guess the coalition staffers were more conscientious than me, because when I got there, a couple minutes late, the forty seats were mostly taken. A black Ralph Kramden was behind the big wheel — on the dash, it still said Greyhound Line as well — and he grinned at me and jerked a thumb to the rear. Just behind him sat the Reverend's executive assistant, Harold Jackson, with his Isaac Hayes head and oversize mustache.

His little mouth made a big good-natured smile. "Mr. Blake! Pay attention to the man. Back of the bus!"

That made those who heard it laugh, including me. Well, it was kind of funny. Looking down the long aisle, I saw Ruth seated way back in that wide rear seat, alone.

Lugging my suitcase behind me, I headed down there, noticing that the staffers — with the exception of Jackson, who was in his standard Malcolm X-style suit and tie — were dressed casually, almost festively. On the guys were lots of brightly colored striped shirts, the occasional sweater vest, and bell bottoms; on the gals, lots of colorful psychedelic-print blouses and dresses, although plenty of them wore bells, too. The effect was kaleidoscopic.

I'd been told to dress casually — I was in the windbreaker, a solid dark-blue sportshirt, new jeans and sneakers — so this hadn't come as a complete surprise. But I hadn't been expecting *Soul Train*, particularly since only a third of the riders were black. Of course, even in the Midwest, kids on college campuses were dressing like this, though the hippie look hung on in some circles.

Ruth's attire was the least garish of the lot. She wore a black silk long-sleeved blouse with small white polka dots on the cuffs and pointed collars; her bells were a matching black, her platform shoes black trimmed white.

After stuffing my suitcase up on an overhead rack, I turned to her, as she scooched over for me, and said, "What have you people been complaining about all these years, anyway?"

Ruth frowned. She didn't know me well enough yet to anticipate where this was going.

Sitting beside her, I said, "Why, it's nice and roomy in the back of the bus. Downright commodious. Even if there is no commode. Nice company, too."

She was smiling now; the combination of Caucasian features and chocolate skin made her seem exotic somehow. Or maybe that was her spice-scented perfume.

She said, "Maybe nobody wants to sit with me but you."

"Then they should see a shrink."

We had four seats back here for just the two of us. Of course, with that Afro of hers, we could use the space.

I said, "Did it happen to work out this way, or did you arrange things so you could grab some quality time with me?"

She gave me half a smirk, which was about right. "You do have a fairly high opinion of yourself, Jack."

"Not really. I was thinking more like you probably wanted to brief me on how to behave at this event."

She shook her head, the smirk giving way to a mild but very nice smile. "No, but that's a happy enough result."

The bus was moving now, a clumsy beast in traffic, not that any other vehicle could challenge it. Somebody toward the front had a portable radio going, the Staple Sisters singing "I'll Take You There" like they were at the wheel. Out the window, about everybody on the sidewalks was giving us the peace sign, but then once the Central West End was behind us, it was just as often the finger.

In the meantime, Ruth filled me in on what would be going down.

Actor Leonard Nimoy — one of many Hollywood stars out campaigning for McGovern — would be speaking first, then introducing Reverend Lloyd. Mr. Spock's presence would guarantee a crowd of kids raised on Dr. Spock. I reiterated that I didn't want to be singled out in the crowd — though being referred to was fine — and she asked if I would be willing to talk to reporters.

"Maybe," I said, "but only if there are no pictures."

The dark eyes were focused on me. "You *really* don't want your picture taken, do you, Jack?"

"It's just that my dad is a former military man who these days is real involved in Republican politics back home in Idaho. That's where I grew up."

"I remember," she said.

She'd been the Coalition repository of my fake background, which was based on my real one but not enough so to provide any leads back to me.

"It would really embarrass my dad," I said, "and as you'd

imagine, we already have a strained enough relationship as it is."

Nodding, she said, "Because of your involvement with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War."

"Right."

We were on I-55 now, the bus rumble steady but not quite so loud that we had to speak way up or anything. "Betcha By Golly, Wow" floated back to us.

"Now, Jack," she said, her dark eyes very earnest, and she touched my hand, in what I'm sure she thought was a non-sexual way (she was wrong), "if there's any trouble from pro-war, pro-Nixon demonstrators, please don't get involved."

"Oh, I won't."

"If you were to... mix it up with some other Vietnam vets, protesting against what we're doing — or maybe some redneck bigot spouting racial b.s. — well, *that* would attract cameras more than anything. So keep your father in mind and your temper in check."

She was preaching to the choir, but I frowned, nodding my willingness to suppress my better avenging angels.

"So," I said, "where's the big man?"

"Pardon?"

"Everybody seems to be on the bus but Reverend Lloyd."

"Oh, he doesn't travel with us. He goes by car."

"That big black Grand Prix?"

"That's right. He has a driver and two armed bodyguards."

"Really, armed?"

She nodded; the way her Afro bounced reminded me of all that red hair of Becky's. Not that those girls would hit it off.

"*You* know what it's like out there," she said, frowning toward the window as we rolled by a brown post-harvest landscape, a crushed floor of dead corn stalks. "You wouldn't *believe* how many death threats Raymond gets."

"Actually I would believe it," I said. "I saw something on TV just the other day about American Nazis." I shrugged. "But I guess that must be pretty isolated stuff."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, some of those crazies are right here in St. Louis," she said, even though right now we were in Illinois. "Ever hear of Zachary Taylor Starkweather?"

I pretended to think. "They may have mentioned him on that TV program. That creep with the corncob pipe? I can't imagine he has many followers."

Last night he'd only had two. Three, counting Becky. Of course, that could have been that caution he liked to brag about taking.

"There are more of them than you'd think," she said with a shiver. "There are thousands in his organization, nationwide. And

they're affiliated with the local Ku Klux Klan."

"You're kidding. The KKK? Aren't they ancient history?"

"Not hardly, Jack. They have hundreds of members in the St. Louis area alone. They mostly operate out of Ferguson."

"Where?" I asked innocently.

Joe Tex was singing, "I Gotcha!" on the portable radio.

"It's a white enclave," she explained. "Ten years ago, in Ferguson? Black people were forbidden entry after dark. They actually closed off incoming roads from black neighborhoods."

"Ten years ago this was?"

"More like eight. *Four* years ago, the first black person was allowed to buy a house. Even now the black population is something like maybe one percent of its twenty-eight thousand or so good Christian residents. *That's* the home of Starkweather and his followers."

"Wow." Betcha by golly.

"So," she said almost sternly, "we have people who want to kill Raymond right in our own back yard."

Not to mention the next seat.

We both relaxed for a while — six hours is a long fucking time on a 1948 bus — and she burrowed into a book she'd brought along, *Invisible Man*. I'd never read that, but dug the old Claude Rains flick. I went back to my latest western, *The Daybreakers*, which I'd be through with before long. Maybe I could pick up another Louis L'Amour when we pulled in at a truckstop.

Just outside of Springfield, we did just that. The invasion of young people into the restaurant, a good share of them black, got some wide-eyed looks from the farmers and truckers here on the outskirts of this town Abraham Lincoln had called home. All the staffers streamed in and found tables and booths. I wound up in one of the latter with Ruth, room for four but nobody made a move to join us.

"Is it my breath?" I asked her, peering over the top of a menu.

"No. It's the company you keep."

"Yeah?"

"I'm a sort of pariah."

"What does that mean?"

"Outcast."

"Because you're Raymond's girl, you mean."

She dropped her menu and her cheeks turned an attractive shade of maroon.

Leaning toward me with a stricken expression, she whispered, "Who... who have you been *talking* to?"

"You. You call him Raymond, not 'the Reverend,' and the other

day, when you saw his wife making a scene — people shouldn't live in glass offices — you damn near cried."

She was about damn near crying now.

She started to slide out of the booth and I reached out and took her by a wrist. Not hard, just enough to stop her, and get her to look at me.

"Please don't," I said. "Don't give the assholes anything else to talk about. I apologize for bringing it up."

She froze. Swallowed. Nodded. Slid back into the booth. Trembling some.

I ordered the meatloaf plate and a Coke and she had a small chef's salad and sweet iced tea. We didn't talk for a while. Halfway through the salad, she pushed it to one side, like it disgusted her, and then she leaned toward me again. Whispered again.

"It was... I *hate* the stupid word, but... a fling. We were together at work a lot, he was having trouble at home, I admired him, still do admire him, I could tell he liked me... and it just, you know... happened. It lasted all of a week and we both came to an awareness that there were things bigger and more important than both of us and our... petty desires."

That sounded like somebody else's words not hers. Somebody who had something in his pants that had gotten bigger than both of them.

"But you stayed on with the Coalition," I said.

She nodded vigorously. "Yes. The cause really *is* more important than some personal relationship that... that..."

"Doesn't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Something from an old movie. When was this? The fling, the breakup?"

She sighed. "Last month. It's been a strain at headquarters ever since. His wife wants... wants me fired... guess I can't blame her... but so far Raymond has refused. I'm hoping I can just, just *weather* it."

I raised my Coke glass. "Here's looking at you, kid."

She lit up. "Oh. *That* movie." She grinned but her eyes were moist. "I don't think anybody ever looked at me and thought of Ingrid Bergman before."

"Oh I don't know. I think maybe there's a Swede in the woodpile."

Her mouth dropped like a trapdoor and she tried to be offended, but could only smile. "Jack, you can be so *outrageous* sometimes."

"I'm out there, all right."

Before we left the truckstop, I picked up a L'Amour novel that was new to me, *The Broken Gun*.

Back on the bus, the portable radio was playing, “Lean On Me” by Bill Withers, and she did, getting a little sleep now that the sun had gone down. I slipped an arm around her. God, she smelled good.

Now that I knew how that prick Lloyd had taken advantage of her, getting rid of him didn’t seem like such a bad idea.

Eight

About an hour and a half before the rally was to begin, the bus rolled into a lushly wooded campus that blazed with orange, yellow, red, purple, the dying sun cutting through dying leaves like it was jealous.

We were at the west end of DeKalb, a modest farm community, but every college campus is a world of its own and Northern Illinois University was no exception. The student union was a couple of modernistic glass-and-stone floors with a sudden skyscraper at the left end, like a Howard Johnson's had turned abruptly into the UN.

That add-on obelisk was mostly hotel, the eighth through fourteenth floors anyway, nine rooms each, most of which the Coalition had booked. Through crisp football weather, staffers and their suitcases moved from parking lot into the student center and checked in at the front desk off the lobby; with that busload it took a while.

It was two to each reservation, but I'd been a late addition and wound up with a Holiday Inn-like room of my own, on the twelfth floor. I freshened up but did not change my clothes, and collected Ruth and went down to a central café called the Pow Wow for a bite before the rally.

The place was packed, every table taken, so we joined an overflow of kids carrying their burgers, fries and Cokes into a nearby lounge with walls of that same rec-room paneling I'd seen at the Nazi church. We snagged side-by-side orange-cushioned metal chairs, turning sideways to eat off a small white table between us. The food was barely edible, but we wolfed it.

"I don't see any sign of either man of the hour," I said, between bites of burger.

Ruth had changed into a Zebra-print maxi-dress that hugged her slender curves. Oversize hoop earrings again, dark eye shadow, very red lip gloss. She was a stunning young woman and a lot of eyes found her, standing out as she did among this mix of sweatshirt-and-jeans college kids and Coalition staffers in *Brady Bunch* colors and bells.

"Mr. Nimoy and the Reverend," she said (avoiding calling Lloyd "Raymond" now), "are meeting with the black student group who invited them. They'll each make an entrance at the rally. Anyway, if they walked through here, it'd start a riot."

She didn't mean race riot — she meant the young people among us who wore LIVE LONG AND PROSPER t-shirts.

I said, "I'm a little surprised no Nixon supporters were around when we got here."

She shrugged. “They’ll probably be out there by now. On either side of the sidewalk, an idiot gauntlet for attendees to run. But, really, we haven’t run into too much trouble lately.”

I figured that was because Nixon was so far ahead in the polls, but kept it to myself.

“For having two such famous guests,” she said, licking mayonnaise from a plump red upper lip (get your mind out of the gutter), “the college hasn’t exactly rolled out the red carpet.”

“No red carpet even for reds?”

She smiled a little. “Not even for reds. They have a lovely auditorium here, I understand. It’s sitting empty tonight. So is the ballroom upstairs. Meanwhile, we’ll be in the cellar.”

Soon enough we were down there, in a low-ceilinged, tiled-floor, gray-walled space about the size of a grade-school gymnasium. Vending machines lined one wall like hoods waiting for the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre to start; some couches and chairs were pushed against the other walls, indicating this was a rearranged lounge area. Maybe fifty folding chairs (with standing room behind) faced a small riser with a microphone on a stand and no podium. A wall-draped McGOVERN FOR PRESIDENT banner, white letters on blue, provided a backdrop.

As staffers, we were let in early by members of the black group sponsoring the event. Security was limited to a pair of DeKalb-uniformed cops and a trio of light-blue-uniformed NIU security guards. The whole thing was feeling a little half-hearted and sad to me, but when the doors opened, kids came pouring in. The fifty folding chairs were gone faster than life-boats on a sinking ship, which was maybe fitting for the McGovern campaign.

The Coalition staffers, most of whom were not much older than these college kids, didn’t take any of the chairs, spreading themselves among those who wound up in the standing-room area. As the audience buzzed and settled into their seats, a recording of “Abraham, Martin and John” came over the scratchy sound system.

“Is that Nimoy singing?” I asked Ruth, who was standing beside me.

She nodded.

It didn’t suck, but the *Star Trek* contingent among us — likely the majority — began to whoop and applaud as if the Beatles had showed up suddenly to rescind their break-up and run through a few numbers.

As the song finished, Nimoy — in a gray turtleneck and blue jeans — came in and strolled to the little stage, smiling, nodding, waving. With his shaggy side-burned hair and square-lensed glasses, he looked more like the hippest professor on campus than a TV star. The folding-chair winners were on their feet, clapping, whistling, hooting, and he

gave them the Vulcan salute — palm out, middle finger and ring finger parted, thumb extended.

With that same hand, he settled everybody down, and when somebody started to dim the lights, he asked for them to stay up.

"*I am not a politician*," he said into the microphone. "*I don't have to support local candidates if I don't believe in them. But I'm here to tell you why I've visited thirty states, campaigning for George McGovern.*"

He was unpretentious and low-key and easy to listen to, but my focus was on the crowd — probably around two hundred of us in here — to see if there were any interlopers, any troublemakers. If there were, and I could handle them without much fuss, that would get me points and closer to the inner circle. But almost everybody here looked like a college kid or a little younger or a little older, and it was clear this was more a *Star Trek* event than a George McGovern one, not that those were mutually exclusive.

Only two guys looked wrong to me.

They were white, pushing thirty, and had on hippie-ish attire that tried a little too hard, tie-dye headbands, leather fringed vests, peace-symbol t-shirts, patched jeans. What really gave it away was how similar their get-ups were. I say get-ups because two possibilities struck me: they were in the same rock band or were undercover cops.

They whispered now and then, smiling and chuckling as they shared private jokes. For guys with peace symbols, they didn't seem terribly interested in Mr. Spock pushing an anti-war presidential candidate.

Right now the actor was talking about how he sensed a real build-up of enthusiasm for McGovern, not just from new, under-twenty-one voters, but from labor, farmers and senior citizens.

"*Of course I'm at a disadvantage*," the actor said with a grin. "*I've spent most of my previous life on Vulcan, so I don't know too much about the people in this country.*"

I was also keeping my eye on that tall, pockmarked, skin-and-bones staffer — his name, I'd learned, was André — who didn't seem to do much of anything at the office yet was always around, pretending to keep busy. He was toward the front of standing room to my left, on the edge of the crowd, fairly close to the door. All in black — black sports jacket, pointy-collar black shirt, wide black big-buckle belt, black leather pants, pointed black boots — as if he'd hoped to disappear in a dark room. But the speaker had double-crossed him, keeping the lights on...

Nimoy was wrapping up with strong words about that Watergate mess on the news. "*It's more than political trickery or even espionage*," he was saying. "*It's sabotage linked to the Oval Office.*"

That maybe showed how desperate this campaign was getting,

making a production out of a chickenshit burglary.

Then Nimoy gave his co-star a big build-up — Reverend Lloyd, that is, not William Shatner — likening him to Ralph Bunch and Martin Luther King. And between the Trekkies and the Coalition staffers, Lloyd got damn near as warm a welcome as Mr. Spock, if minus the whistles and hoots and hollers.

Six feet or better, in a black suit and black-and-red tie, movie-star handsome — if that movie star was Richard Roundtree, anyway — Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd strode in with his two tall black, black-suited bodyguards following. They peeled off to position themselves at the entry's either side like eunuchs guarding a harem, and the Reverend strode to the stage, oozing strength, confidence, charisma. He joined Nimoy, who was leading the applause. The two men exchanged handshakes and respectful nods, and Nimoy disappeared down into the audience, where a front-row folding chair awaited.

The applause continued, as the commanding figure stood before the McGOVERN banner exuding the confidence of General Patton in front of a big fat fucking American flag. He smiled, showing some startlingly white teeth, and gave a little head bow to sections of the crowd. I guess he'd been on the news enough to deserve this kind of recognition and response. But it still sort of surprised me.

He had a bass voice with rumbling resonance and spoke with the sharp articulation of a ghetto kid who'd trained himself to sound damn near Shakespearean. He acknowledged Nimoy, making a remark about Vulcans being "a minority group underrepresented in government," and began to speak with a rolling kind of poetry that made it hard to pay attention to the actual content.

Standing at the microphone (but not holding onto it as the actor had), head back, eyes unblinking, he said, *"Senator McGovern is a warrior, a war hero of yesterday who brings courage today to the battle against poverty and hunger, to the fight against political dishonesty and warmongering, to the never-ending struggle between right and wrong. His is a voice for reform, to inspire the Democratic party to bring about greater participation from blacks and browns and women and young people!"*

André slipped out the door, between the two bodyguards, who paid him no heed. Maybe he was going out for a smoke — it wasn't allowed in many areas of the student union, including this one — or maybe he'd just heard all of this before. Hell, he might just be making a quick trip to the john.

But I didn't think so.

"*We must band together, become a coalition of many colors...*"

Now the pair of fake hippies exited together, out the door on the opposite side of the room.

"*Why this effort to end the war at this time, during an election year? Why not four years ago? Before Cambodia? Before Laos? Before so much blood and treasure had been tossed heedlessly to the winds of time?*"

I went out the way André had, though I did earn glances from the harem eunuchs. You have to watch these white boys, you know, even when they're on your team. I went up the stairs two at a time, crossed the lobby.

At the front double doors, I glanced out and, as Ruth had predicted, Nixon supporters were lined up on either side of the sidewalk — maybe a dozen, with their placards shouldered: NIXON'S THE ONE; RIGHT ON, MR. PRESIDENT; RE-ELECT THE PRESIDENT; and (my favorite) YOU CAN'T LICK OUR DICK. They were in their thirties and forties primarily, though several in their twenties wore Army jackets.

No way I was going down that receiving line, looking this much like a real college student. More to the point, I didn't think André had either, or the fake hippies, who might be cops after all, tagging after him to make a drug bust.

If Reverend Lloyd really was funding his efforts by distributing dope via his speaking tours, André seemed the perfect candidate for carrying the ball for him. He had that emaciated druggie look, which I didn't detect on any of the other staffers.

Oh, many of the Reverend's young troops were into weed, no doubt — yesterday afternoon, Harold Jackson had given them a loud reminder at headquarters that no "mowing the grass" would be tolerated on this overnight, and that included "behind closed doors — your hotel rooms are on university property!"

He'd even taken me aside, the new kid, to emphasize the same point. "Mr. Blake, you get caught blastin' a joint, we *all* go down. Remember that, son."

I hadn't smoked weed since Vietnam and not much of it at that. A sniper has to have an edge. Mellow is not a good state of mind when you're killing people.

So I'd assured Big Chief Second-in-Command of my chronic lack of interest... only now I seemed to be about to learn whether the Coalition's '48 Greyhound had been transporting more than just politically active young people.

Looking past the lined-up Nixon lovers, however, taking in the parking lot, I didn't see the bus anywhere. Earlier, the vehicle had let us out at the curb, but apparently had not managed to get itself parked in the big lot, which wasn't nearly full.

At the lobby's hotel desk, a kid in a blazer with a GO HUSKIES button told me buses sometimes parked around on the west end of the building. His pointing finger led to me more double doors, where I

looked out and indeed saw the blue-and-silver bus, parked midway in a lot, well away from a few cars parked near the curb. André stood at the door of the big vehicle, which he appeared to be unlocking. No sign of the Mod Squad.

He went up inside.

Maybe two minutes later, André came down out of the bus and locked the door behind him. The way he walked said something was tucked under his black sports jacket, beneath his left arm. Damn, he seemed to be making a beeline right toward me.

Not that he'd seen me — I was plastered next to the doors, along one side, just peeking out. But he was up to the curb-parked cars now and maybe I should split.

Then — from somewhere off to my right, where they'd sat in a car maybe, or just waited by the building — came the two fake hippies. They approached him quickly.

So it *was* a bust...

...only it wasn't.

Right there on the sidewalk, so close I could have burst through the doors and jumped them, André carefully withdrew a plump paper sack, its top folded over, about big enough for a couple loaves of bread. But I didn't figure what he handed the pair was bread.

Speaking of which, they gave André a fat envelope in exchange, which the skinny staffer opened to riffle through two inches of green, not counting, just confirming.

For one dumb moment, I thought, *They're dirty cops*, but then I realized in a saner second that they weren't any more cops than they were hippies. André was the mule making a delivery, and they were just picking up the goods.

Flunkies.

Like André.

Whose boss was downstairs, his manner majestic, his words stirring, as he built up the hopes of a bunch of college kids and science-fiction dorks, telling them how they could make the world a better, safer place.

Meanwhile, a fake hippie was sticking a switchblade tip into each of two plastic-wrapped not-bread loaves, coming back with white powder, which he tasted and approved.

Nine

After the event, the tired but exhilarated staffers climbed on the bus and were taken to downtown DeKalb and dumped, with rides back scheduled at eleven and midnight. The farm community had a fairly lively main drag, with restaurants, bars, clubs and a movie with a nine o'clock show.

Ruth and I wound up at the Pizza Villa. On a Saturday night, this very old-fashioned red-and-white-checked-tablecloth joint was bustling and we waited half an hour for seating, and another half hour for the pie. We covered a lot of topics along the way.

Waiting on a bench, marinara sauce in our nostrils, "O Sole Mio" (Connie Francis) in our ears, I asked Ruth innocently, "Where does the Reverend get his funding?"

She shrugged. She was still in that zebra-print dress and looked fantastic. "Well, he's paid for his speaking engagements, in most cases. There are donations, of course, including some from very wealthy people, black and white. He's written three books that generate considerable royalties. And, of course, most of the staff is unpaid."

"How do these kids afford that?"

"The normal Coalition staff is much smaller — this is a political campaign, remember. How can they afford it? Well, the white ones, frankly, have parents who fund their airy-fairy activities, despite not agreeing with them. Thank God for unconditionally loving parents."

Not how I'd describe mine.

"What about the others?"

"You mean the black ones? Some are recent grads who haven't found meaningful paying work yet. You'll notice many only work half-days, because they have other jobs. Some have taken leaves of absence from work and tap into their savings. We have several substitute teachers among us, and accountants and—"

"Well-educated people."

"That's right. We're fussy about who we take on."

Not *that* fussy. I was here.

She was saying, "I'm sure you know why the Reverend insists on suits for the men and fairly conservative clothing for the women, at headquarters. We have to put a good face on who and what we are."

"How many staffers are actually paid?"

"Myself, Raymond's, uh... the Reverend's driver, and his two personal assistants—"

"You mean bodyguards."

She shrugged, nodded. "Yes. Death threats, like I told you. And of course Mr. Jackson, Harold, who is quite a public speaker himself,

which is another source of income. There's Monique, who's really skilled secretarially…" Her dark eyes saddened. "We used to be such good friends."

Monique was almost as attractive as Ruth, a short, shapely girl in her twenties who had not gone the Afro route, sticking more with a Ronnie Spector look.

"What happened between you two?" I asked.

"*You* know."

"The… fling?"

A shrug, a nod. "She hasn't spoken to me in weeks."

I wondered if Monique had had her own fling with the boss, but didn't offer up the possibility for discussion.

"And I'm stuck rooming with her here," she said with a sigh. "A roommate who stays mute till she goes to sleep, and then her lousy snoring keeps me up half the night."

"Well, I have a room to myself. There's a couch."

"I couldn't impose."

"Right, a terrible imposition, sharing a room with a lovely woman like you."

She tilted her head. Narrowed her eyes. "It would have to be strictly two staffers just sharing a room. Nothing else. Nothing more."

"You can trust me. The Coalition is very fussy about who they put on staff, you know."

Her chin raised and she studied me. "Do you snore?"

"No complaints so far."

"…We'll see."

A waiter finally ushered us to a booth. Some piped-in asshole was singing "Funiculi, Funicula." Come back, Connie, come back.

At least the pizza was good, very crisp, lots of sauce, not too much cheese, some zing to the pepperoni.

"So," I asked her, "what's your training?"

"I'm a legal secretary."

"No wonder they have to pay you. A degree like that takes money."

"Usually. But I don't come from money. My father I never met, my mother is on welfare, and my two younger sisters, by another long-gone daddy, are still in high school. I won't kid you. It's a struggle."

"But you went to college?"

She bit off the end of a pizza slice and nodded. Chewed, swallowed, said, "I was always a good student."

"You must have been some kind of genius."

"Well… I did get a full-ride scholarship at Washington."

"What Washington? State, D.C…?"

"Washington University. Back in St. Louis. Lived there all my life."

"And are still there, I see."

"Still there." Another bite. More chewing followed by a swallow. She licked sauce off her upper lip. "And still living with my mom and my sisters."

"That must be nice. To be able to get them into better circumstances."

Her smile was saucy, in several senses. "Not really. We still live in Pruitt-Igoe."

"What's that?"

Her smile was amazed. "Never heard of it? But then you're an Idaho boy."

Actually Ohio, but she wasn't to know that.

I said, "So it's some kind of slum?"

A smirk, a nod. "A housing project in the '50s that just went almost immediately to shit. Crime-ridden, poorer than poor. A war zone. They're demolishing a lot of the buildings right now."

"Good thing you're out of town."

That made her laugh. "Well, there are... or *were*... something like thirty-three buildings. But there have always been pockets of that nasty place that weren't so bad. Floors where the tenants knew each other, where there were a limited number of families, who took pride in maintaining their apartments. Who lobbied for playgrounds and gardens. But it's coming to an end, bad and good. The buildings will all be down before you know it."

"What will you do?"

"I'll have to find better-paying work than the Coalition can afford, that's for sure. But not till after the election."

"That won't be long." Nibbled crust. "You really think McGovern can win?"

Her eyes flashed and so did her smile. "Oh, I *know* he can. The Republicans are underestimating all these new young voters, who fought so hard against Vietnam."

Who fought so hard against *going* to Vietnam was more like it.

We caught the eleven o'clock bus back and stopped at Ruth's room, which was on the ninth floor, and picked up her overnight bag and train case. Monique wasn't back yet, so Ruth left a note.

On the elevator, I asked her, "What did you write to your roomie?"

"Just that I found somewhere else to sleep tonight. She'll know it's you. Everybody's seen we're friendly."

"Is that what we are? So what's the upshot?"

"Upshot is I'll be called an even bigger slut." She shrugged one

shoulder. “I won’t be with them that long. Most will be gone as soon as the election’s over.”

“Like you.”

“Like me.”

I let her into my room and she had a look around. At the double bed with the floral spread, the couple of campus landscapes on the wall, the dresser, the little table, the drab green carpet, the blah beige walls. Her suitcase stayed in her hand.

“You said you had a couch,” she said. “Where is it?”

“I must have been thinking about my apartment.”

A dark-chocolate eyebrow arched in the milk-chocolate face. “Really? You were just confused?”

“I get that way sometimes. No problem. You can share the bed with me. It’s a double.”

“You mean, they’re all going to say I’m a slut anyway, so what’s the harm?”

“Now that you mention it.”

Amusement wrestled with irritation on her pretty face. Then she willed it blank and set the suitcase down and walked right up to me. Locked eyes with me.

“We’ll share the bed, Jack, but you will stay on your side and I will stay on mine.”

“Absolutely,” I said, and kissed those sticky red lips.

She didn’t seem to mind. In fact, I’d say she cooperated fully. She stepped back, gave me an appraising look, and out of nowhere said, “I’m taking a shower. Alone.”

“I could stay on my side, and you could stay on—”

She reached up with two hands and lifted the Afro off. Fucker was a wig! But initial shock past, I noticed she looked every bit as pretty with her cropped-to-the-skull actual hair, which added to the hoop earrings gave her a more African look.

“You could probably use a shower yourself,” she said, resting the wig on the dresser. She took off the earrings, too. “It’s been a very long day.”

“It has,” I said.

“I won’t use all the towels.”

“Thoughtful you.”

She’d been in the stall five minutes when I joined her in there, naked as she was, and asked for the soap over the noisy spray. She wasn’t mad at all. Didn’t even pretend to be. We washed each other, soaping each other’s backs and fronts, among other things, leaving the faces to their owners but little else. No kissing, no fondling. Just getting squeaky clean.

Without platform shoes, she was a good three inches shorter than

me, slender with cupcake breasts riding high on her rib cage, tilted up impertinently, her pubic thatch trimmed back, like the hair on her head. That tight, firm flesh pearled with water might have been a sculptor's masterpiece left out in the rain.

Gentleman that I am, I let her exit the stall first. We both toweled off. It was all very proper, except for my raging hard-on. After exiting the bathroom, I switched off the overhead light but left the nightstand one on.

Naked, I sat on the edge of the bed. "Okay if I take this side? I have trouble sleeping on the left side for some reason."

Her response was interesting. What you'd call non-verbal.

She knelt before me and starting sucking me. She was gentle but thorough, taking me to the edge of a cliff where I wanted to jump. Then she looked up at me, no makeup, no lip gloss, and I bent down to kiss her perfect face, her mouth, her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, while my hands glided over supple smoothness.

Then she drew away, rose and walked around the bed, elegantly, like a fashion model on a runway who forgot her frock. She lay down on the bed with her knees up, her legs long and sleek and just slightly spread, a sideways slice of pink peeking out of her close-cropped bush.

"I'll take this side," she said.

I was on her and in her in a moment, no talk of rubbers or the pill or was this too risky, just two people who had to make love right now, had to merge into one, moving slowly, and then not so slowly, pumping, thrusting, trying to find my way ever deeper inside of her, as she worked to let me in, building to something outside of time or practical concern.

When I finally eased off her, she got up and moved gracefully back into the bathroom. With considerably less grace, I used the Kleenex box on the nightstand. She returned in sheer panties and got her cigarettes out of her purse. She stood at the window, where the drapes were as sheer as her panties, and she smoked, looking out.

"Help yourself," she said softly, meaning the Cools that she had left on the nightstand.

"I never got the habit."

Her lovely long back was still to me. "Oh? Any bad habits at all, Jack?"

"Nope. I rarely drink to excess. I don't overeat, despite what you witnessed at the Pizza Villa. And I especially don't engage in unprotected sex with strange women."

Now she glanced over her shoulder and gave me that saucy smile again, minus the sauce this time. Then she returned to looking out through the sheer curtains, at nothing, or at least that was what I sensed.

"Jack, tonight when we were telling each other about ourselves," she said, and of course mostly it had been about her, by my design, "there's something I didn't mention."

"Oh?"

"I was married once."

"Oh."

"No kids. Didn't last long. Didn't know him well, though I wished I could have. I met him one weekend at a church dance and he was going overseas in a few weeks. Back to Vietnam. We saw a lot of each other while he was on leave. Then on impulse we flew to Vegas and got married and had two days of honeymoon and he was gone."

He died over there.

"He died over there, Jack. I've never quite been the same. That's why I'm so against the war, Jack. That's why I want McGovern to win so bad."

She came to bed after a while and turned her back to me again. Lights were off.

I said, "I was married. Wartime thing. Similar conditions. But I didn't die over there, not so's you'd notice. Whirlwind romance, like yours. But then I came home and found her in bed with a guy... and the marriage died, even if I didn't."

And the next day I went around to talk to the bastard, found him working under his little sports car and I kicked out the jack. Well, he'd called me a bunghole. Now he was deader than my marriage.

She turned over onto her side and looked at me with pity, which I didn't mind actually, because understanding was in there, too.

But they wound up letting me walk, and the Broker saw the story in the papers and came looking me up...

"Jack... I guess we both have our war wounds, don't we?"

She went to sleep in my arms. Of course, before long we were facing the other way from each other. That was okay. She snored a little.

Ten

Sunday evening, around six, the blue-and-silver bus that had been born the same year as me let us all out at Coalition Headquarters on East Euclid. Staffers and their overnight bags headed in all directions for cars that had been parked on side streets where parking meters weren't an issue. Neon signs for bars and restaurants had that nice glow you only get at dusk and I asked Ruth if she'd like to grab a bite.

"Love to," she said, suitcase in one hand and train case in the other.

We'd spent a long day, mostly on the bus, with a non-Nimoy event at the state teacher's college in Kirksville. Light attendance compared to yesterday and a disappointment, though the Reverend's rousing speech got great response. If you're wondering, André had done no business this afternoon, at least not that I caught him at.

"I've eaten breakfast at Duff's," I said to her. "I wonder if it's as good at night? Or if they're even open."

She was smiling and nodding, and now I realized some of the Afro bounce was due to its being a wig. "They're open and very good — such a cool funky place. The Croque Monsieur is to *die* for."

"What's that?"

"A kind of grilled cheese and ham sandwich."

"I'll try it, but I won't give my life for it. What about this luggage? We don't want to lug it there."

"I have a key," she said, nodding toward the HQ entry. "I can leave mine inside. Yours, too, if you like."

"No," I said, "I'm parked a couple blocks down," nodding across the street. I didn't want her to know I was living so nearby, not at the YMCA, which was the address I'd supplied the Coalition. "You slip yours inside and I'll walk down and put mine in my car trunk."

That seemed an acceptable plan to her, and she was letting herself in as I walked across the street with my suitcase. Around the corner, I went down the alley, where my Impala SS was parked. For several seconds, I just stood there like a guy on a railway platform who missed his train.

A yellow late '60s Dodge Charger — well-maintained, nice and clean — was next to the Impala on the graveled, slightly sloping parking area behind our building. Far as I knew, now that my little redheaded waitress had moved on, the third-floor apartment was vacant. So this did not seem to be a new neighbor.

Whoever he or she was — no, *he*... that Dodge Charger was a guy's ride — the vehicle told me something about the owner. Well, not the vehicle so much as the mint-green "Heart of Dixie" Alabama

license plates and the Confederate flag decal on the back window.

I unlocked the Impala trunk and shut the suitcase in there.

Ruth was waiting patiently in the recess of the HQ doorway. The bus was gone and so were any other staffers.

"Honey," I said, "I'm sorry. I just remembered I promised somebody I'd do something tonight."

"Oh... well, sure." She seemed justifiably hurt by that lame excuse, but I didn't dare be any more specific.

I asked her, "Do you have a car?"

"Sure."

"Rain check?"

"You bet." But the sticky-red smile was strained.

I gave her a kiss on the cheek, said I was sorry, and hustled across the street.

At the Impala, I opened the trunk back up and got in my suitcase, taking out the nine millimeter, which I'd folded up in some sportshirts. The noise suppressor, a black tube a little longer than the gun itself, had gotten an undignified wrapping up in my dirty underwear; I screwed it onto the Browning barrel.

Above the weathered wood of the second-floor deck, the kitchen lights were off. Nothing suspicious about that. Nothing suspicious except that Charger, which I wished was away down south in Dixie. Away, away.

I transferred the silenced weapon to my left hand and held it to my side. Went up the back stairs as quietly as I could — the boards had creaked since the day they were hammered together and tonight was no exception — and crossed the deck to the back door. The key I worked as gently as possible, but of course it made its little click.

I paused, as I dropped the key in my windbreaker pocket, looking through the door's double glass panes across the darkened kitchen, to see if anyone would emerge. Emerge as in charge the fuck in there with a gun blasting or anyway raised to do so.

The door stuck some, so I had to put some shoulder into it, but I tried to do that gently too — the nine mil with its endless silenced barrel was in my right hand now — and the door gave and I stepped in. I left it ajar, which I didn't love doing, but making a sound was the greater risk.

I could hear a voice echoing down the boxcar rooms. All the doors were open. That might or might not be a good thing.

"Now, li'l man," somebody drawled, the Charger owner no doubt, "you best loosen up your lip 'fore I wipe it the hell off your ugly puss."

I toed off my sneakers, oh so carefully. In my stocking feet I crept to the open door to my bedroom, where the lights were also off. Peering around I could see all the way down to the living room, where

a big guy in a green-and-black plaid shirt and jeans and clodhoppers paced an area of four or five feet slowly in front of Boyd, who was in a chair with his hands tied behind him. Probably duct-taped, because that was how his ankles were bound to the kitchen chair he was in. I was two rooms away, and they were in the middle of the living room, but I could easily see that Boyd's face was a battered bloody mess.

Boyd, knowing our target was out of town, had probably been loafing today, watching TV, in a white t-shirt and pajama bottoms and bare feet. Well, it *had* been a white-shirt. It was splotched scarlet now, like a tie-dye job that never really got off the ground.

"What in the fuckin' name of our lord and savior Jesus H. Christ are you *doin'* here, Jewboy? Best open that piehole now. Or you rather *die* in that chair?"

Boyd wasn't Jewish, at least as far as I knew, but he didn't correct the guy. He seemed barely awake, his eyelids swollen till only slits were left, his mouth puffy, welts and abrasions at odd angles on his cheeks, like war paint applied by a drunken Indian.

The big man — a good six-three, broad shoulders, narrow waist, muscular legs, a regular lumberjack in that plaid shirt — backhanded Boyd with a left. His right had a Smith and Wesson .22 auto in it. Not a small weapon, yet it looked like a purse gun in that massive fist.

I was in Boyd's room now. By the door. Or anyway by the nightstand where his latest fairy porn paperback was folded open. Funny, the lumberjack sported a thatch of blond hair, like he'd walked off the cover of one of Boyd's books — a dream man, giving him a nightmare time of it.

"You been watchin' them niggers across the street, ain'tcha? *Why?* What the fuck you *up to*, you kike sumbitch?"

Boyd's surveillance set-up was over by the window, the pillows, the radio, the binoculars, the notebook.

Boyd licked his puffed-up lips and said, "I'm not Jewish, you big steaming pile of shit."

That cleared that up.

He backhanded Boyd again. "Don't get mouthy with me, you little cocksucker!"

"You're... you're getting warmer, asshole," Boyd said. He was smiling a little. Not defiance in the face of fear and pain, no — he saw me in the doorway.

But our guest didn't.

Not wanting to fuck up the suppressor — it had taken a long damn time to find one worth a damn — I shifted the gun so that I held it by its barrel, tubing angled down, and swung the nine-mil butt like I was pounding a stake into the ground, making a satisfying mushy crunch. Still, he was so big I had to reach up to do it, and I wondered

if he'd just say, "*Owww!*" and turn and look at me with one eye squinting.

But instead he went down like a felled tree, only less dignified, shaking the floor and the furniture. The .22 auto seemed to jump from his hand of its own accord, landing over by the couch.

Now he was down on the carpet on his left side, mouth open like a big slumbering baby, and I cautiously moved him onto his back with a foot on his shoulder. Should he be faking, and make a grab for my leg, the nine mil was turned around in my hand again and he'd be fucking dead.

If he wasn't already.

Through the thick lips, Boyd managed, "Is it alive?"

Blows to the back of the head like the one I'd delivered killed you often as not. Wasn't like on TV where Mannix got clocked on a weekly basis.

The lumberjack had a peaceful look, the kind they pay morticians to achieve. But he was breathing, all right, and quite a specimen. His hair was a golden yellow many a female would covet and his jaw was strong and firm in a way some men might envy. His eyes, however, were close-set, his nose flat above and lumpy below, broken so often that the point was moot.

Boyd's fat lips flapped. "Duct tape... he brought... on the couch."

Got to admire a pro attitude like that. Tied to a chair, beat to shit, he doesn't yell for me to untie him or help him or any such nonsense. First make sure the intruder is out of commission.

I used the duct tape to tie the lumberjack's wrists behind him, then wrapped it around his ankles, and finally wound more of the stuff around his legs under the knees. Then I checked for a wallet and found none. A couple hundreds in fives, tens and twenties were in one pocket, and went into mine. In the other was a small pouch of lockpicks, not unlike the one I carry in my wallet. Also the keys to his Dodge Charger. Nothing else. Certainly no I.D.

Only then did I use a pocket knife I'd found in a denim jacket our guest had tossed on a chair. I cut Boyd loose and got him to his feet.

"Go clean yourself up," I told him. "Take half a dozen aspirin, why don't you?"

He nodded like that was a fine prescription and trundled off.

I sat in the now-vacated kitchen chair, some Boyd blood spattered at my feet. Several yards away, Boyd's slumbering questioner breathed hard, scarlet dripping through his longish hair like somebody had cracked a bloody egg on his skull.

Who was he?

My first thought was that this was somehow a result of the other night. That Becky and her Nazi boyfriends had called in help to settle

the score. But I felt I'd had a meeting of the minds with Commander Starkweather — he certainly wouldn't have sanctioned this. And, anyway, the questions the blond good-old-boy had been asking Boyd, in a decidedly pointed way, indicated he wanted to know who *we* were. What *we* were up to.

Hell, Starkweather already knew. He'd hired us, hadn't he?

Hadn't he?

But the Broker hadn't really confirmed that. And something was glimmering in the back of my head.

Before long Boyd came back in. He'd spruced up for our caller — the bloody t-shirt replaced by a blue sportshirt, pajama bottoms by navy slacks, bare feet shod now in navy sneakers. I wondered if I'd tidy up like that, if somebody rescued me from a Mamie Van Doren blonde who was torturing my ass, and I wanted to look good when I questioned her. Maybe.

Of course, my partner's face was a puffy horror, his eyes slitted and swollen, like the ref should have stopped the fight a lot of rounds ago. But the blood was washed off, and his left hand held some ice wrapped in a washcloth that he moved around to sore places on his face.

Without a word, we pitched in and lifted the lumberjack up by the arms and flopped him into the chair. It wasn't any harder than moving a roadkill buck off the highway. I left the additional duct-taping to Boyd — we wanted him secured to the chair — and, without my asking, Boyd filled me in.

"He was just suddenly in the room with me," Boyd said. "I was watching the game, and it was pretty dull and I fell asleep. And then there the son of a bitch was, big as a redwood."

Four beer cans were beside the recliner Boyd pulled up to watch TV.

"You got yourself a back-door man," I said. "He had lockpicks. How long was this going on, before I showed up?"

"Felt like hours. Probably ten minutes."

"You got lucky on the timing. Is the gist that he spotted us keeping tabs on the Reverend?"

He nodded, getting to his feet, starting in with the tape around the guy's chest. "I never said jack shit to the mother-fucker. He just kept hitting me. I'm surprised he didn't bust his damn hand."

"Does he figure us for cops?"

"Ask *him*."

Boyd nodded to our guest, who was coming around in his chair, wincing, licking his lips, raising his eyebrows, like that's what it would take to get his eyes open.

"You... you're the *other* one," he said, looking at me, his upper lip

curled back.

"Am I?"

"Who the fuckin' hell *are* you bastards, anyhow?"

"Well, I'm the guy with your gun." I showed him the .22, which was in my right hand, the silenced nine mil in my left at my side.

He looked at the .22, almost crossing his eyes to do so, and I laughed a little and slapped him with it. A cut on his cheek opened, two inches or so, and blood dripped out. It was like he'd cut himself shaving. With a Bowie knife.

He gave me some more curled upper lip. "You think I'm afraid of you?"

"As long as I have the guns, I don't care. As it sits... as *you* sit... your odds for survival are about one in ten. And that's a generous estimate."

"All right," he said, and let air out of his big chest. "I admit it. You fellas got the upper hand at present."

"Think so?"

His chin came up, his wound crying little ruby tears. "Let's back 'er up a step. Who are you boys anyhow? You ain't cops or feds or we wouldn't be *havin'* this party."

"Right. You'd be arrested. Nobody official would do this."

I slapped him with his .22 again. Other cheek. Opened another cut. Really sloppy shaver, this boy.

His eyes, which were a dark blue, blazed. "You better hope I don't make it outa this chair, you little punk-ass prick."

"Yeah. Obviously. Let's back 'er up a step. To where the guy with the guns gets to ask the questions. Oh, and my friend here, who you beat the piss out of earlier? *He's* also got a gun now."

Our captor flicked his eyes toward Boyd, off to the side, pointing the long-barrel .38 at him.

"So I see," the lumberjack said. "What if I took that gun away from him and stuck it up his fuckin' ass?"

"You'd have to ask him," I said. "Now let's start with a name."

"Eat me," he said, through a wide smile.

"For a guy who's obviously been in his share of brawls, you have good teeth. Or did you pay for those? Either way, you probably wouldn't want me to break them."

He stopped smiling. "I ain't gonna give you my name. Who cares what my teeth is like if I'm dead?"

That made more sense than I'd have guessed he was capable of.

"I don't need a last name," I said. "Just a first."

"Bite me."

"I'm Jack."

He glanced at Boyd. "Jack, huh? And who's he?"

“Not Jill. This conversation is just you and me. Never mind him. What’s your name, friend?”

“...Delmont.”

“I said first name.”

“That is my first name.”

“Okay. You’ll recognize these questions. They’re the ones you were asking when I came in.”

He frowned, not following.

“Who are you?” I asked. “I don’t mean your name. Why are you here? What’s your function?”

“Function? What the fuck—”

“Your job. You came here to do a job, right?”

He said nothing.

“Delmont, you came here to a job. Right?”

He sucked in breath. Let it out. Nodded.

I knew. Or anyway I thought I knew. At least one way that this, and some other things, would make anything close to sense had just occurred to me.

“Delmont, you don’t have to tell me why you came north. You don’t have to tell me what job you came to St. Louis to do.”

Boyd was frowning at me, not getting it.

I said, “You came to town to kill the nigger across the street. You’re here to whack the Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd.”

His bloody-cheeked astonishment was priceless. He had the same expression as a magician’s volunteer from the audience hearing, “Is this your card?”

Boyd was just slightly astonished himself. He said, “Jack... what the hell?” At least he’d had the presence of mind not to call me Quarry.

I gave him a look that said stay out of it.

Then I said to Delmont, “You know, some pretty strange coincidences happen from time to time.”

“Huh?” Now he was squinting at me. The blood from where I’d whacked him had dried and gone black and looked like a lace cap on his head. A lace cap sewn by a blind, brain-damaged seamstress. The blood on his cheeks wasn’t flowing anymore but the scarlet streaks that had been left still glistened.

“You see,” I said, “my friend and I are watching Reverend Lloyd because we’ve been hired to kill him.”

“What? But I... uh... uh...” Then he clammed up. His brain was overloading. In a cartoon, steam whistle sounds and engine gears grinding would have accompanied smoke coming out his ears.

“Jack!” Boyd said, and he came over and took me by the arm. Walked me to the doorway to his bedroom, and then pulled me in

there. Delmont, tied to his chair, was trying very hard to think.

"What the hell's the idea?" Boyd whispered. "Now we have to kill this guy."

"*Before* we had to," I said. "Now, maybe not. Look, it'll be my responsibility either way. Just go along with me."

Boyd swallowed hard. His face looked like he'd stuck his head in a beehive and it hadn't gone well. But he nodded.

Back in front of our guest, his gun in my right hand, mine in my left, I said, "We were hired to kill the black bastard. Now I want to hear why you're here."

"I... I... I..."

Aye yai yai.

I said, "You were hired to kill him, too."

"I was hired to kill him, too!"

Boyd's eyebrows went up. His puffy eyes otherwise stayed put. They had no choice.

"Delmont," I said, "my friend and I handle contracts. Is that what you do? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Delmont swallowed thickly. "Maybe so. Maybe so."

This was not one of Broker's people. Not by a long shot. But there were other Brokers around, some not so sophisticated. Like Delmont wasn't quite as sophisticated as Boyd and me.

"Popular guy, the Reverend Lloyd," I said. "Looks like two people with money want him dead. Two separate contracts."

Delmont was trying to make that work in his head. "That's... that's..."

"A coincidence, yeah, I said that before. It's also possible that we were hired by the same party, and this is some kind of half-assed attempt to make sure the hit really goes down. Like we fail, you step in. Or vice versa."

"But that don't work," Delmont said, goggling at me. "Not without us knowin' about each other. Without us knowin' about each other, somethin' really *bad* could go down."

"Right. Like you stumbling in on us and taking us for cops or feds or interlopers."

"Right," Delmont said, nodding, then he winced, because that hurt. "So... so what happens now?"

"Chances are," I said, "though we're not likely working for the same party, that those parties are aligned."

"A what?"

"Well, allies. On the same side. Delmont, you've heard that expression, the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing?"

"I heard it."

"That's what happened here. I'm almost sure of it."

He squinted in apparent thought. “I’m workin’ for one hand and you for the other.”

“That’s it. You got it.”

His eyes widened. “Well... where do we go from here? If we’re on the same job... sort of... could you maybe let me out of this here chair?”

“I like the way you think, Delmont. And there’s a good chance you’ll be getting out of that there chair. A good chance you’ll live through this and wind up in the black.”

“In what black? If you mean pussy, I ain’t interested, ’less maybe she’s high yellar or somethin’.”

“No, no, Delmont. I mean, you wind up with what *you’re* supposed to get paid, and we wind up with what *we’re* supposed to get paid.”

“But that nigger can only die once.”

“Nothing wrong with your math skills, Delmont. But the right hand, who hired you, and the left hand, who hired us, won’t know that. All our employers will know is that the hit went down successfully. Everybody wins. Except Reverend Lloyd.”

Smoke was threatening to come out his ears again. “Okay... but...”

“Delmont, what I’m saying is... I suggest we partner up.”

Boyd sighed. Applied the homemade ice pack to his face.

Delmont shrugged, as much as he could, duct-taped up like that, and said, “I’m willin’. How ’bout I kill his black ass, and we all get paid, and we all go our separate ways?”

“Close. I’m going to suggest much the same thing. I suggest that my partner and I do the hit. We get paid for doing it, and you get paid for doing nothing.”

He was starting to smile.

“And if we screw up,” I went on, “and wind up dead or something, with Reverend Lloyd still aboveground? Well, then you can come in and finish the job. And get paid.”

“Will you still get paid?”

“No, Delmont, we won’t — we’ll be dead.”

“You’ll be what?”

“Dead or in stir. This happens if we screw the job up, and you have to come in and do it after all. But right now you just sit back and wait to see how we do.”

“Not in *this* chair I won’t.”

“Just a figure of speech, Delmont.”

“Not to me it’s not. And anyway, this’ll all go tits up if I don’t get out of this chair and out of here, lickety damn split.”

“Why is that?”

He looked at me like I was really, really dumb. “The money drop

is tonight. I pick up my share. That's the way it works where I come from. Night or two before I do the job, they got to pay me. But I don't have no direct contact. Everything's done through a middleman."

This all sounded a little too familiar.

I asked, hoping I wanted to hear the answer, "What do you call your middleman, Delmont?"

"Well, I call him Fred. That's his name."

That was a relief.

I said, "So the drop is tonight?"

"Right. I'm gettin' payment straight from the guy who hired the job."

"So, uh, you work alone?"

"Right. I come in and do recon, then bang bang, I shoot 'em down."

Boyd was groaning softly.

I said, "Delmont, I'm confused. First you said no direct contact, then you said the guy who hired the job is paying you in person. Tonight."

"Yeah, it's at this meeting. If you saw, you'd understand."

"Well, Delmont, I am going to see. Because you're taking me."

"I am?"

And Boyd cut him out of the chair, looking not at all happy about it. About as unhappy, in fact, as Delmont was pleased to get his Charger keys back.

Eleven

The moon crawled above the horizon, huge, full and blood-red, what we called a Hunter's Moon back in Ohio. With Delmont at the muscle-car wheel, we were heading southwest on US 50 through rolling countryside, with idyllic rural Middle America gliding by, from forested ridges and well-tilled valleys to antebellum brick mansions and fenced modern farmhouses. Along the way, the moon floated higher, its face now a glowing Halloween orange.

I was the navigator, reading typewritten directions off a small piece of paper to the driver. Traffic was light. Delmont had switched the radio on to a country station and I looked for rock and failed, nothing but more steel guitar and nasal singing, and lots of Sunday fire-and-brimstone preachers who wanted you to send them money. I switched the radio off.

On stretches we'd talk, snippets of conversation initiated by the blond, square-jawed lumberjack behind the wheel. Before we left him behind, Boyd had bandaged his hunky former captor, who now really did look like he'd cut himself shaving. The paucity of cars sharing the concrete strip made for a dream-like ride.

Delmont flashed a vaguely nasty grin over at me. "You know, a car like this is a weapon all by itself."

"That right."

"Oh yeah. You can run people down with it. Go fast enough, hit 'em just right, they go flyin'."

"That a fact."

His eyebrows flicked up and down. "Really, that gun you got there don't stack up at all to the weapon I got control of."

"I'm not pointing it at you, Delmont." The nine mil in my right hand was draped across my lap.

"I know, I know you're not. I'm just sayin' — what if I was to swerve and just crash into a telephone pole or some other car, or maybe... in of these little towns? Just punch the pedal and slam into a building or somethin'?"

"What if you did, Delmont?"

"Well, my point is, I'm at the wheel of a car that weighs, oh shit, I don't know... four-thousand pounds?"

"You're probably guessing a little high, but yeah, right. And?"

"And all you've got is that gun. That little ol' gun."

With the extension of the noise suppressor, it didn't look all that little. But compared to the car it was.

"So you're saying," I said, "that you have the more dangerous weapon. Of the two."

“That’s what I’m sayin’. I could wreck this here car with you in it, and then where would you be? And if you was to shoot me, ’cause you saw I was steerin’ toward somethin’? Well, we’d just crash anyway and you’d be up shit crick.”

“What order do you want me to take those in, Delmont?”

“Huh? Any order, I guess.”

“Okay. If you crash the car with me in it, you’re *also* in it. So what happens to me probably happens to you.”

He was frowning. “Like getting killed.”

“Like getting killed. Or maimed or fucked-up, and should one or both of us survive to wake up in a hospital, guess who would be there?”

“...Family?”

“Cops. Or possibly somebody else who handles contracts for your middleman, Fred — to take *you* out. So the cops can’t ask you about him.”

“Fred wouldn’t do that.”

“Are you sure?”

He clearly wasn’t.

I said, “Now let’s say you start speeding up and I sense you plan to crash into something on purpose, side of a bridge, a harvester poking along, whatever. And I shoot you. You are dead. I am alive. I can reach over and steer and maybe even get my foot over there to the gas and brake pedals — tricky in these bucket seats, I admit — but most likely I could guide the car to safety. Why, Delmont? Were you thinking of doing any of those things?”

He was frowning. Like a kid taking a time out in a corner. He shook his head.

“Just makin’ conversation,” he said.

Suddenly the moon was brilliant silver-white. The rolling landscape became as sharply focused as a prize-winning photograph.

After a while he asked, “What branch was you in?”

“Did I say I served?”

“I can tell. Can’t *you* usually tell?”

“Yeah. Marines.”

A big grin blossomed. “Me, too! Man, I shoulda known. Hardass like you. You ain’t so big, you know physically, but you got that attitude. Semper fi, mac!”

“Semper fi,” I said.

“I got USMC tattoos all up and down my arms and my back, too. You got any?”

“No.”

“Where was you? I mean, Nam, of course. But where?”

“Hill 55, south of Da Nang.”

"Weren't that a sniper platoon?"

"Yeah."

"You know where I was?"

"No."

"Hill 51. Firebase Ross. We was practically neighbors."

"Practically." I was referring to the typed directions. "That's the turn — that gravel road past the mill pond."

He didn't slow enough to suit me, whipping onto the thing. But I didn't say anything. Nobody likes a backseat driver.

"So," he said, finally slowing down, the ride bumpy and crunchy, harvested fields on either side of us, the Hunter's Moon brighter than the Charger's headlights. "You got somebody like Fred?"

"I do."

"You always work in pairs like that?"

"Almost."

"Makes for less money, don't it?"

"Yeah. Half the money." Usually.

"What we're doin' here tonight, Jack — pickin' up the payment before the job is done... does that seem odd to you?"

"No. Why. Does it to you?"

"No. Just thought maybe it did to you. Different folks work different ways. Way we do it, Fred guarantees the client reimbursement if the hit don't go down or the hitter gets hit or some shit."

"My Fred does the same."

"Hangin' around after the job to pick up the paycheck, well, hell, that just don't cut it."

"No it don't."

"Listen, uh... I'm sorry about knockin' around your little Jew friend."

"That's all right. If we'd been as sharp as you, we'd have handled you pretty much the same."

He frowned over at me, confused. "What do you mean, if you was as sharp as me?"

"You noticed us, Delmont. We didn't notice you. You were one up on us."

He grinned, feeling good about himself, apparently not factoring in that I had the gun. "Yeah, well I guess that's right. Got a lot in common, you and me. Marines. And in the same business and such. Might've been buddies in other circumstances."

"Might have," I allowed. "But we're partners now, and that's friendly."

The fields had fallen away and we had trees on either side of us, mostly bare of leaves with an occasional evergreen making its smug

presence known. The moon was so big, it looked unreal. You couldn't get away with it in a movie.

He chuckled. "I got to say, sittin' on the sidelines and collectin' my pay for doin' diddly squat? That don't suck. That don't suck at all. That gun you got there?"

"What about it?"

"Browning, right? Nine mil? I never seen a silencer that long."

"Does the job."

"I never found one works for shit. It sure ain't like on TV."

"This one is."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Just makes a little hiccup." I sat forward. "I think we're here."

Up ahead on the right, starting at the foot of a hill, half a dozen cars were parked on the right, straddling the road and its shoulder, leaving only narrow passage. The vehicles ranged from a Chevy pick-up to a familiar white Lincoln. Delmont went on by and up and over. On the downslope another half dozen or so more parked cars hogged the road, again in a mix that suggested owners from the highest and lowest strata of what passed for civilization around here.

He pulled in after the final car, almost at the bottom of the hill, and shut off the engine.

"Keys," I said.

I held out my palm.

When he frowned, the eyes crowding the flat bridge of his nose seemed even closer together. "What for?"

"For now. Our partnership is in the early stages, Delmont, and I'm senior partner. So it's all about pleasing me."

He gave me a pouty look but also the keys, which I stuck in my windbreaker pocket.

I said, "I got a bad feeling I already know what kind of meeting this is."

The pout turned into a grin. "Bet you do. You're a smart one. But you can just wait here. I'll go get my money. Could take a while."

"I'll tag along for now."

"But you won't be able to..." He sighed, smirked, said, "Suit yourself. Anyway, you got the keys and I gotta get somethin' out of the trunk."

He got out and so did I. At the rear of the vehicle, I unlocked the trunk and Delmont raised the lid. At first glance what was within looked like folded white sheets, but Delmont rustled around with them, before taking them out, and revealed them as a white uniform with a red insignia bearing a white cross. Tucked beneath was a pointed hood with eye holes in a full-face mask.

"Now do you see why," Delmont said grinning goofily, "the client can make the payoff directly and still not see who I am? Or me him, neither?"

"I do," I said. "Hand me those."

"Why?"

"Never seen one of these costumes up close."

"Not costume, uniform."

"Uniform, then. Gimme."

Reluctantly, he gathered up the white garment and its snappy hood and I took them and laid them on the hood of the car parked behind us for appraisal — a nice clean Buick that wouldn't spoil the freshly laundered cotton. Spread out there, it was like a KKK member had got deflated.

Delmont, reaching for the outfit, said, "I might need a little help gettin' into 'em."

"I don't think so." I pointed the silenced nine mil at him, and nodded to the open Charger trunk. "Get in."

"What?"

"Come on, Delmont. You heard me. I'm gonna go collect your money for you."

"What for? We're partners! And anyway, ain't no way I'm gonna fit in that trunk."

"Sure you can. You're big but nimble. As for you going after your money, how do I know you wouldn't bring a bunch of crazy darkie haters back here and eliminate me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because everything you've done in our partnership so far has been under duress."

"Under what the fuckin' fuck?"

"Under the point of a gun. Our partnership is in its early stages, remember, and this is your trial period. Get in."

He sighed. He made a face. Whined some more. But he crawled in, folding himself up like a fetus in a womb by Dodge. I shut the lid hard and he kind of yelped, but I figured he was just making a point.

"Be quiet," I told the trunk. "I'll be back with your money."

With the Ku Klux Klan dress and hat over my arm, I walked up the hill, but stayed down in the ditch. I didn't need any other latecomers spotting me walking up the gravel road. At the crest, I climbed up to where a cluster of trees provided a nice spot for a panoramic scenic view. The blazing white Hunter's Moon would help.

But the moon wasn't the only thing blazing — so were three wooden crosses, the ones on either side maybe five feet high, the center one around eight. Thirteen men in white robes and hoods were gathered around the crosses in a well-spaced circle, as if about to play

a demented game of ring-around-the-rosie.

The obvious leader, in a green silk version of the outfit, stood inside the circle, near enough to the central burning cross to feel its heat on his back. In front of the smaller fiery crosses were standard white-robed and — hooded members with the Stars and Stripes on one pole and the Confederate flag on the other.

This bizarre assemblage was down there in the center of a large, woods-surrounded clearing that somewhat overwhelmed them, robbing them of the significance they sought. The night had turned chilly with some wind picking up and it made the fire dance and the flags flap and the uniforms flutter. They didn't look sinister or foolish or anything like you might expect. In the light of the Hunter's Moon, the flames burned a bright orange with blue highlights and the white uniforms seemed to glow, while the waving flags took on a near majesty. If some racist Rembrandt had his easel set up, he could get a really nice calendar out of it.

I sighed, leaning against an oak tree. I'd never been much of a joiner, but this would have to be an exception. I got out of my windbreaker and stowed it under the tree, then got into the robe. It was a little big for me — they'd probably been given the lumberjack's sizing — but that helped keep the nine millimeter in my hand hidden. The suppressor meant I had to hold my hand sideways, bent at the wrist, but nothing in life is ideal.

Finally I put on the hood. Despite oversize eyeholes, the thing really limited your field of vision.

Slowly, carefully, but confidently, I moved out of the wooded hilltop and down the slope. They had no sound system setup — this was a roughing-it outdoor event, after all, like a Boy Scout Jamboree — but I could hear the guy in green silk speaking.

"*...we will show those red Commie son-of-a-bitches what real freedom is! We will arm ourselves, we will learn hand-to-hand combat for this coming battle!"*

Of course, the well-projected radio-announcer's baritone belonged to Commander Zachary Taylor Starkweather. Just because the Lone Ranger is wearing a mask, that doesn't mean you don't know Clayton Moore is under there.

"Oh, I know we will be outnumbered, though I don't know about you, *but I don't fear these long-haired college punks much, not very much, no."*

He paused for them to laugh, and they did. I bet that was what it was like at Al Capone's boardroom table.

"*We will teach these college brats the hard way what it really means to be an American, a white, God-fearing, Christian American. They will learn that it is a sin under God to racially mix. They will learn that the Bible condemns the homosexual."*

I slipped into place in the circle, my hooded neighbors making room, putting myself as close to Starkweather as possible; his pointy head turned my way, so I figured he'd noted the new arrival.

"*They say we are nigger haters, first and foremost. But I respect the niggers that keep to their own. Still, it is true that you can take the nigger out of the jungle... but you can't take the jungle out of the nigger!*"

That got laughter and applause. But I had a feeling it was something they'd heard before, plenty of times. A catchphrase they were laughing reflexively at, like Gleason saying, "Away we go!" or Maxwell Smart asking, "Would you believe...?"

"*No, it is the* Jews *we will hang first. No more will our taxes go to fund Israel. No more will we tolerate the sins of the Jews against humanity and God. As your Grand Dragon, this I promise, to each and every knight in this Klavern.*"

Grand Dragon, huh? Explained the green silk housedress, anyway.

"God bless the Klan!" he shouted. *"God bless the Klan!"*

They echoed him, but out in the open like this, it didn't have much punch. Hard room to fill.

Then the Grand Dragon began to sing "Amazing Grace" and they all joined in. I decided it was time to break ranks and entered the circle, walking right up to Starkweather, who paused in mid-lyric and his lamb-dropping eyes glared at me through the big eyeholes.

"Back in line, knight!" he demanded.

"I'm here for my payment," I said. "As arranged."

The eyes got squinty. "Later, man. Can't you see the meeting is in full swing?"

"I'm not a member. I want the money now. Take a break." I nodded to the guy holding the Confederate flag, then to the one with Old Glory. "Have Moe or Larry take over. Time to do business."

But I'd misjudged it. This wasn't like interrupting an Elks Lodge meeting or not respecting Robert's Rules of Order. Several of the rank-and-file were abandoning the circle to come toward us, or really toward *me*, and then more joined in. They were unfriendly ghosts floating right at me, and I backpedaled, knocking into the guy with the Dixie flag. He stumbled backward, into the smaller cross, and the flag went up in flames and then so did he, and he started running around like, well, like a man on fire.

They were all yelling, screaming now, though of course the one-man conflagration on the run was screaming loudest. But the rest were still coming at me, closing in as they shouted their outrage.

The Grand Dragon stormed through and leapt at me with his hands clawed from under his big sleeves, like a villain in an old serial about to strike, and Jesus, what do you *think* I did? I ran from him. Back behind the burning crosses, I turned and kicked out like Bruce

Lee and caught the bigger cross at its base. It splintered, it gave, it fell on the Grand Dragon, not heavy enough to take him down and pin him or anything, but when he pushed it away, the wind-whipped flames were curling around him, drawing him to them, stroking, fondling, embracing, squeezing a nearly orgasmic cry from him as he succumbed to their seductive power.

The base of that cross was wrapped in some flame-retardant material, so I tried picking it up and the thing was light, which made sense as who wants to carry a heavy wooden cross for very long, and now the enraged hooded white robe wearers were swarming around me. I whipped the thing around, awkwardly, the flames snapping and hissing and leaving tracer trails in the night, catching some of those white uniforms, decorating them with dancing orange-and-blue demons, and from those white uniforms the demons leapt to other white uniforms and others.

Turns out white sheets are pretty fucking flammable.

A hooded handful that the fire hadn't yet touched were poised like they wondered if they should rush me. I hurled the burning cross at them and they changed their minds, scurrying away. I took the opportunity to get out of the hood and then the robe, knowing I was anything but immune to the hell I'd unleashed here. Then I kicked the other two fiery crosses over, to further discourage anybody fucking with me.

And then everybody but me was running away, those that were on fire trailing flames like the ass of a jet engine, while those who had somehow avoided catching fire were making sure they stayed that way. They ran in seemingly every possible direction and it was like seeing roaches scatter when you turned on a kitchen light. Roaches that were on fire. That were screaming.

Screaming loudest of all was the Grand Dragon, who was flat on his back, on the grass, which had caught fire around him, creating a flickering orange body outline. The green silk was black now, his hood a crackling charcoal like a roasted marshmallow that stayed too long on the stick — or was that just his skin with the cloth burned away? Either way, he was staring up at me with Jolson eyes, trying to roll on his side but not able to, his nerve endings just not able to send the right signals anymore.

The prick deserved a long, slow, miserable death. But he was wailing in such agony that there was nothing to do but shoot him in the head. Maybe I was getting soft at that.

Then I was alone in the clearing. The wind was gradually putting the fires out, the short dead grass not able to really get going. Two extra crispy corpses were the only real damage done — one of them Starkweather himself, the other the bearer of the rebel flag, who'd

made it about fifteen yards, dying on his stomach and even now sending up smoke signals that would not be answered.

I did for Starkweather what he couldn't do for himself. Using my foot, I rolled him over and over, until the fire was out. The silk robe was all but gone, but the smouldering remnants of his tan Nazi-esque uniform gave up his car keys.

By the time I started walking toward the hill, the night had turned very quiet, the Hunter's Moon painting everything a vivid ivory. After all the hubbub, the sudden solitude was nice. Soothing.

At the top of the hill, through the cluster of trees, I could see only two cars remaining. All those Krazy Klansters had jumped in their cars and scrambled back to their real lives. The only sign that they'd ever been here was a handful of scorched white robes and hoods.

One of the two remaining cars was the white Lincoln with rebel flag decal and the WALLACE FOR PRESIDENT bumper sticker — down at the bottom of the hill, mirroring the Dodge Charger parked on the other side.

I unlocked the Lincoln trunk and easily found the plump envelope of cash tucked behind the spare tire. Hundreds, as crisp as the man who'd brought them. One-hundred hundreds — ten grand. Having collected my windbreaker, I stuffed the envelope in a pocket.

I walked up the hill. The night was quiet. If there was a God, maybe He'd noticed the fuss down in the clearing. But nobody else seemed to have. I walked down the hill.

Unlocked the Charger trunk.

Delmont looked cramped yet strangely comfy. You can get used to an indignity after a while.

"Jesus fuck, Jack!" He looked up at me the way a dog in its cage does its overdue master. "What the shit-fuck-hell was goin' *on* out there? Uh... is something burnin'?"

I helped him out. He moaned and groaned a little. I could hear bones pop. It's tough being ten pounds of meat in a five-pound can.

He was damn near babbling. "I mean, I could hear screams and guys rushin' around and swearin' and even bawlin'! Car doors openin', slammin', more engines startin' than Indy, drivin' off, kickin' gravel... what the hell did you *do* down there, man?"

"I got your money," I said.

That brightened him.

I handed him the fat envelope and he grinned as he thumbed through the new bills. When he looked up, I was pointing the silenced nine mil at him.

"Jack — what's the idea, man? We're partners!"

I put out a palm. "Hand it over."

"Jesus fuck! That ain't fuckin' *fair*, Jack!"

I snatched the envelope back, slipped it in the windbreaker pocket.

He looked like he might cry. “What do you need *my* money for? You said I’d be in the *black*!”

“You will be,” I said, and the nine mil hiccuped.

Twelve

Boyd and I sat in our underwear at the kitchen table at the lookout pad. It was a little after eleven P.M. and the end of a very long day, much of it spent on a bus getting from one out-of-town campus rally to another, only to return to find a lumberjack beating Boyd to shit, followed by a moonlit KKK meeting. Little man, you've had a busy day.

Ten thousand dollars — all in crisp new C-notes — rose in two equal stacks on the Formica tabletop, like we were in a high-stakes poker game and somebody forgot the cards.

I had taken a shower and my t-shirt and jockey shorts were fresh. Against the kitchen wall behind me, next to a wastebasket, was a garbage bag in which all the clothes I'd worn this evening were stuffed. They had to be disposed of. One must assume that forensics had come to Missouri.

I will be straight with you and admit I considered keeping the entire ten grand. Hadn't I been the one on hazardous duty? Going from the boonies to the St. Louis suburbs, behind the wheel of the Dodge Charger, I'd decided to keep seven and give Boyd three. By the time I got back to the Central West End, I'd decided to give him twenty-five hundred and say it was half. That Delmont had been paid five grand and it was an even split.

Then when I came in the kitchen way and Boyd greeted me in his underwear, all contused and puffy-eyed and worried, I said, "We've got ten grand to split."

What his grin did to that battered face must have hurt. Anyway, it hurt to look at.

I tossed him the bulging envelope and said, "Here, you split it. I'm a walking crime scene. I need to get out of these clothes and into the shower."

When I returned in my skivvies, with the smoke smell scrubbed off at least, I sat across from Boyd, who had his stack of green neatly before him, with mine waiting at my chair, like he was waiting to say grace. Reading an expression on that grotesque mug was tough, but I could tell he was troubled.

"Where's Delmont?" he asked.

"In the trunk of his Dodge Charger."

"...Is he alive?"

"What do you think?"

"Aw. Kind of a shame. He was a sweet kid."

"Want me to get you a mirror? Maybe if I smash you in the face with it, you'll call me sweet."

"Guess you had to do it."

"Not really, but it was prudent. And we each have five grand we wouldn't have, which is a good thing, since this job is almost certainly off."

His face made something that might have been a frown. "Why do you say that?"

I gave him an account of my evening in southwest Missouri under the Hunter's Moon. Several times he tried to open his puffy eyes wide and damn near succeeded.

"These were separate contracts," Boyd said, when I'd finished. He was thinking aloud. Each word carefully parceled out. "Delmont was hired by the Nazi. Our contract comes courtesy of parties unknown. Just a crazy coincidence."

"Yeah, I don't like it either."

I got up and opened the refrigerator door. I reached for a Coke, remembered the caffeine, and grabbed one of his Budweisers instead. Nasty fucking beer, but maybe the alcohol content would help me sleep. Exhausted as I was, I was still kind of keyed up.

Sitting back down, I said, "The only way this could be one contract is if somebody *really* fucked up."

Boyd nodded. "Like maybe Delmont was on hand waiting for the go-ahead, should we screw up or bail."

"Right. Only Delmont didn't seem to have any sense of that."

"None," Boyd agreed. He was drinking Bud, too. He sipped like that was worth doing, and said, "What if it's *not* such a big coincidence?"

"You did get hit hard."

"No, hear me out. We have a deadline, right? We got till the end of the month."

I nodded. "Specifically, before the big McGovern rally here in St. Louis where the Reverend is featured speaker. Yeah."

"With specific instructions from the Broker *not* to hit Lloyd there, right? And if we haven't made it happen by then, we're to pack up our tents and go home."

Now I saw what he was getting at. "The Broker is too shrewd," I said, "too smart to want Lloyd taken out at a big event, with lots of security. It'd be a stupid play. Even a suicidal one."

The slits in the macaroon eyes widened. "But a homegrown hater like Commander Starkweather wouldn't see it that way."

"No he wouldn't," I said. "He'd want to make a statement, and what better way than take down a prominent black leader in public. And that rally — biggest of Lloyd's campaign for McGovern — would be the natural place to do that."

Boyd pounded the table with a fist, kind of lightly but enough to

make the money stacks shimmy. “And *that’s* what Delmont came to town to do. A low-end hitman hired through racist redneck channels.”

“But the Broker insists the Lloyd hit isn’t ‘overtly’ political, or racial,” I said, “preferring a less showy removal. Okay. That makes these two contracts, with their contradictory goals, feel a little less coincidental — though I think we might still be missing a piece. Not that it matters.”

“It doesn’t?”

I shook my head, sipped some lousy beer. “Tomorrow morning, when one of us checks in with him, the Broker’s almost certainly going to pull the plug. The shit will fly in this town when the Commander turns up burned blacker than everybody he ever hated, with a bullet hole in his head.”

“Maybe not by tomorrow morning...”

“Maybe not. But I’ll talk to Broker on a very secure line where I can spell everything out. Hell, maybe I should call him tonight and wake him up. Then there’s Delmont.”

Eyebrows rose over the awful eyes. “What about Delmont?”

“Well, his body’s going to be found on a side street, in the trunk of his Charger, where we’re going to dump it a good distance from here.”

“We are?”

“Yeah. We’re going to get dressed and I’ll drive the Charger and you follow me in the Impala. Can you see out of those things?”

“Sure.”

Maybe. But he looked like one of the Mole People.

“It is kind of a shame,” he said.

“Knock it off about Delmont already.”

“No, not him. Dumping that Charger. I came by plane, you know. I could use a car, sweet ride like that.”

I grunted a non-laugh. “That ‘sweet ride’ is registered under Delmont’s own name. Apparently the Dogpatch branch of Associated Assassins is just fine with a member using his own name and his own vehicle on the job. And keep in mind Delmont and Starkweather were killed by the same gun — mine, remember? I’ll switch out barrels on the nine mil, sure, but the bullets will connect the two kills. Which is why the Broker is likely to yank us out of here. Delmont’s racist pedigree combined with the late Commander’s Nazi résumé will put the spotlight on local racial matters, which’ll surely lead to increased protection and attention for Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd. Our target, remember?”

“Yeah,” Boyd said, sitting up now. “Best dump the Charger.”

“And Delmont.”

“And Delmont. But, really, he wasn’t so bad.”

"Go put some pants on."

Fucking Odd Couple was right.

We dumped the car ten blocks north, in a black area. That was a risk, two white guys making a drop like that, since we might be remembered if seen; couldn't count on us all looking alike to them. And we are talking about a bright yellow muscle car. But we chose a residential area that was quiet and basically asleep, so we should be fine.

I left the keys in the unlocked car, which might give somebody a nice surprise, followed by a not nice surprise, when the trunk got opened. Anything that confused the issue was good.

We stopped at a phone booth outside a closed gas station and I put in a call to the Broker. Again, it went right to him, maybe because it was so late. I told him I needed an absolutely secure line, so we could call a spade a spade, a remark the Broker took as me being cute but was completely accidental.

"My house was swept today," he said.

"My compliments to your housekeeper."

"I meant electronically swept."

"I know. That time I *was* being cute."

And I told him everything I'd shared with Boyd, even the ten grand we split. It was no skin off his nose or money out of his pocket, either.

"I'm assuming you want us out," I said.

"Not just yet."

"Not yet? What if the cops come around the Coalition office and do background checks?"

"They won't likely, but should they, yours will hold."

"My address won't. I gave them the YMCA, like you said, but I haven't set foot in there."

His voice radiated patience; you'd never know I got him out of bed. "I made the reservation and paid by credit card over the phone. A credit card as secure as this line. You will be fine. Oh, you might want to go to the Y and drop by your room. One of those rare times it might pay to be seen. Maybe take a swim there. You like to swim."

"Yeah, I know I like to swim. I'm the one doing the swimming. But swimming in shit I don't like. Or blood."

"Understood. But there's no need for melodramatic overstatement. You boys stay on for a while. Again, if things look compromised, follow your own judgment — I won't second-guess. You're the ones on the scene."

"That's right. Don't forget that. So. Was that Starkweather character our client or not?"

"Obviously not, or I would indeed advise you to pull up stakes."

Did anybody else on the fucking *planet* use "indeed" in conversation like that?

"Last time we spoke," I said, "you implied he might be *connected* to our client."

"It's possible. Perhaps not directly, but... possible."

"It's a secure line, Broker. You needn't be coy."

"I do, if I'm to maintain the role that I play in our relationship, which is as a buffer, as insulation, as a middleman."

As a redundant prick.

"Your role," he was saying, "is fairly well defined. I won't insult your intelligence by reminding you what the boundaries are."

"Well, I'd be glad to insult yours. Where should I start?"

"Now, Quarry, I understand you've had a very full and taxing evening. I can tell you, with utter sincerity, that I am very pleased that you survived the unpleasant circumstances you happened upon this evening."

"Circumstances like getting attacked by a KKK Klavern, you mean?"

He chuckled. "You do have a knack for getting yourself into the most outlandish jams."

I held the receiver out and looked at it. Shook my head. I wasn't going to win with this guy. Or maybe I was just too beat to try.

I said we'd talk tomorrow and he said that was a good idea, and we exchanged goodbyes and hung up.

I tried to sleep but couldn't. I tossed, I turned, back, sides, belly, and still my brain refused to stop buzzing, the sheets getting more and more tangled. I kept turning things over in my mind, getting nowhere, but always coming back to the same conclusion.

Boyd and I should not hang around.

Tonight I'd killed two people who were not on my dance card. Yes, I picked up ten grand for my trouble, five after splitting with Boyd, but this job had really gone off the rails.

I turned on the nightstand light and read. Half an hour later, I finished the Louis L'Amour paperback and climbed out of bed, in my underwear. Light edged under the door between my bedroom and Boyd's, so he was probably awake, too. I knocked lightly and announced myself. He said come on in.

He was reading a paperback called *Gay Safari*. Both his hands were showing, which was a relief.

"Just passing through," I said. "Too wired to sleep."

"No problem," he said, still looking like the victim of a beekeeping accident, and returned to bettering his mind through

literature.

I shut the door to his bedroom and crossed to the recliner that faced the television. It was after two A.M., and not much was on, but I found an old Charlie Chan movie. It was terrible, and just what I was looking for — something that would put me to sleep. Thing was, Mantan Moreland was so damn funny, I never did get drowsy, though I was well aware that my Coalition friends across the street probably wouldn't find this wonderful black comedian at all amusing. Their loss.

Every time Mantan said something that made me laugh ("Murder's okay, Mr. Chan, but you *wholesale* it!"), I would look over at the nearby window toward the Coalition HQ, sort of reflexively. I was finally just getting drowsy when Mantan said, "Move over troubles, here we come again!" and I glanced over and there were lights on over there.

I got up and went to the windows. Knelt and looked out and lights were on in the rear of the place. At close to three A.M. on a Sunday night or anyway Monday morning, lights going. I used the binoculars but saw no one moving inside, though a storeroom door seemed to be partway open at the rear by the restrooms, between the two glassed-in offices. The light was coming from back there.

I knocked at Boyd's bedroom door and said, "Me," and found him still reading.

I said, "Something's going on across the street."

He blinked swollen eyes at me. He looked like a fish you'd throw back. "At Lloyd's headquarters?"

"Yeah."

"What the hell for?"

"Well, that's what I'm going to check out. Do you have anything I could take that isn't that .38 of yours? It's louder than an elephant fart."

"What's wrong with your Browning?"

"I'd need to switch out barrels and I don't want to take the time."

He nodded and got into a drawer of his nightstand and handed me a six-inch item with an ebony handle and metal trim.

"A switchblade? What are you, Boyd — James fucking Dean?"

"Do you want it or not?"

"I want it."

"Just be careful with it — cutting edge is razor sharp. Don't hurt yourself. Try the switch."

The stiletto blade popped out with a snap. Like a robot erection.

"Okay, thanks. Can I ask you one thing, Boyd?"

"Sure."

"Are you a Shark or a Jet?"

I quickly climbed into a dark sweatshirt and black jeans and black sneakers and went out the back way, coming around the building. The street was dead. No traffic at all, stoplights in flashing mode; pavement was wet and shiny from street cleaning, reflecting the now lower-hanging Hunter's Moon.

I crossed to the HQ side of the street, but didn't bother trying the front door, going around to the alley instead. Parked back there along the building was a late-model Oldsmobile Toronado, army-green with a black vinyl top. Powerful ride, not inexpensive.

Nobody behind the wheel.

Nobody in the alley, either. With the unopened switchblade tight in my fist, I moved down to and around the parked Olds. Near the rear door to Coalition HQ, I paused. The door was closed, but its edges were bleeding light. I could hear muffled male voices. I drew closer and plastered my ear to the wood, but the door was thick and heavy and all I got for my effort was louder muffled talk.

But then the talk got even louder, and closer, and I darted away, slipping into the recess of a doorway behind the adjacent building.

Peeking carefully around the corner of my hiding place, I saw two white men emerge, one big in width and height both, the other slender and not tall but not small either. They wore topcoats and hats like it was 1952 but had a timeless gangster look — the big man had a face plump from pasta and hard from hurting people; and the slender one was mustached with a narrow face that was intelligent in a racetrack tout way. They might have looked corny to me if I couldn't read how fucking dangerous they were. The slender one was counting money in an envelope, quickly, just giving it a second check, having no doubt already done so inside. The bigger guy was just watching. He liked money. Well, we had that in common.

The big guy opened the driver's door and climbed behind the wheel, the slender one got in on the rider's side, and the Toronado started up with a powerful engine throb and rolled by me. I had plastered myself against the door within my recess, enveloping myself in darkness. Or anyway I hoped I had. That big guy could take my switchblade away and hand it to the slender guy, who would pick his teeth with it while the big guy beat me to fucking death with an arm he tore off me.

I wasn't unhappy to see them go.

Then I heard something that sounded like a key chain rattling, which is exactly what it was. André was locking up Coalition HQ's rear door after his wee-hours meeting with business associates. He was in a black sharp-collared jumpsuit with red trim and no jacket, but his sleeves were long, so he should be okay in the chill.

Tucked under an arm — right out in the open — was a paper bag,

its top folded over, just about the right size for a couple loaves of bread. Of course that wasn't bread he was carrying away.

He was heading out of the alley when I called out, "André! Wait up."

He swiveled and I was right there, a few yards from him, the switchblade hidden in my fist, blade still sleeping. If he ran or tried anything, it would wake up.

"Hey, it's me. Jack. From work. We haven't had a chance to rap yet." Sarcastic but lightly so.

"White boy," he said, voice like sandpaper, eyes diamond hard and rhinestone glittery, "what you wanna do is, walk away now. You wanna jus' forget what you think you see. Those men? They nasty-ass men. You be very goddamn dead without tryin'."

"The Reverend himself couldn't have made a better speech, André. Stay cool. This is no hijacking. I'm not after whatever's in that paper bag. Coke? Horse? Just don't care."

Nostrils flared in the pockmarked, sunken-cheeked puss. "Then why the fuck you standin' there starin' at me with that stupid face in the middle of the night?"

"Doesn't matter what time of day it is, André, you got the same face. Like your face is always there, telling people like me that you're still using."

His eyes narrowed, losing none of their hardness. He was sorting through his options. I had no idea whether he had a weapon or not, but chances were he did.

"All I want to know is," I said, "are you the top of the food chain? Are you cracking the whip or just another mule?"

Why did I want to know? I guessed there must be some part of me that wanted Reverend Lloyd not to be dirty. Some part of me that wanted to walk away from a job that didn't suit my requirements. I wasn't soft. Just fussy.

"Why, you think your white ass gettin' a *cut*? Ain't no way."

"Did I say I wanted a cut of your end? Just tell me. Do you answer to somebody, or is this campus distribution scheme your own brainchild?"

He must not have had a weapon after all, because he flung the paper bag at me and its hard-packed contents hit me in the chest, startling me. That freed his hands, gave him the half-second he needed to rush me, putting a spiky shoulder into my belly and he took me down, hard, on my back.

Now I was looking up at him and damned if *he* didn't have a knife, not a switchblade but a fucking combat knife, held in his fist in time-honored stabbing position.

I popped the blade and slashed across his throat, like a stock boy

using a box-cutter, and his eyes opened wide, combat knife clattering to the alley floor, and the gash in his throat sprayed my face red, like a horrible spigot had been turned on all the way, and the warm coppery stuff was in my hair and all over my shirt and fucking everywhere, even in my eyes. At least it didn't burn.

I shoved him off of me and he lay on his side with vacant eyes, the blood oozing from the gash but not really flowing anymore because his heart wasn't pumping. I was a mess. A bloody mess. How the fuck had Jack the Ripper managed it, anyway?

My shirt and shoes I took off immediately, wrapping the latter in the former, so I wouldn't leave bloody footprints. Then with all the care I could muster, I left the alley, bare-chested, in stocking feet, making sure as best I could that no cars were coming and nobody was on the sidewalk or in a window. I was shivering and some of it was the chill air. The loaves of dope I dumped down a sewer, the switchblade too, once I'd rubbed any fingerprints off.

Then I moved quickly, though not running, back to the apartment, the alley way. Up the back stairs and getting out of all of my clothes, underwear too, off of me and into the garbage bag with the clothing from the earlier fun and games. Then I took my third or was it fourth shower of the day, and leaned against the shower wall with both hands, my head under the spray and watched the blood go *Psycho*-ing down the drain.

Afterward, smudgy red was on the towel here and there, and I was bent over bare-ass adding it to the garbage bag of clothing-turned-evidence when Boyd came in. In his undies, finding me stark naked stuffing a bloody towel into the bag. His eyes opened as wide as their puffy pouches would allow.

"I'll have to reimburse you for the switchblade," I said.

Thirteen

The water in the YMCA pool was exactly the way I liked it, comfortable once you'd been in for a while, and not so immediately warm that you felt you'd fallen into a great big bath. Just enough snap to the temperature to let you think, and I could stand some of that. Thinking, I mean, although swimming would fill the blank just as well.

As the Broker had suggested, I'd gone to the YMCA on Locust Street in downtown St. Louis, where a room had been booked and paid for, to be seen and to have a look at the cubicle where I'd supposedly been staying. The setup was that you always asked for your key at the desk and handed it in when you left. So between the various clerks, mostly part-timers, kids and the underemployed, it would be assumed I'd already been here.

At the pool, I had an "open swim" time to myself, just me and that echoey *lap-lap-lap* ambiance that I knew so well and the strangely soothing scent of chlorine in that world of reflecting water that helped me reflect.

Right now I was swimming freestyle with a stroke smooth enough to be envied by a high school champ, like the one I'd once been. At the same time, my mind was finding nothing smooth about how I'd been handling things lately. If you're somebody who yells at the TV when the hero does something stupid, I can only remind you that this was not TV and I am not a hero.

A hero wouldn't have impulsively broken ranks at that KKK meeting and caused fiery chaos to erupt. A hero wouldn't have blundered into the aftermath of a drug deal and slit some bastard's throat and gotten drenched in warm sticky red. I would have to do better.

Of course, doing better meant leaving St. Looie right now, and if the Broker advised that, I would not argue. What I would learn from this lively debacle was not to let myself be talked into coming out of the shadows where my gun and I belonged to get involved up-close-and-personal in the target's life and his sphere of influence.

In the pre-dawn hours — after I was showered with blood and then showered blood off me — I'd told Boyd what had happened, more or less, in the alley behind Coalition HQ. The "less" part was that I left out that I'd confronted André, saying instead that he'd caught me eavesdropping.

"Well now," Boyd said, "we *have* to scrap the job."

We were in our underwear at the kitchen table again.

"Probably," I admitted.

"No probably about it, Quarry."

He was right, of course, if for no other reason than a staffer with his throat slit in the alley behind Coalition HQ unquestionably meant cops.

I said, "The thought of walking into that office and having to weather a bunch of questions from some St. Louis Columbo does not give me a warm fuzzy feeling. I admit it. But what if I don't show up today? Suddenly I'm a suspect. In a day or two, my background story blows up. They bring in sketch artists. My face is on the news. Think of it this way, Boyd — *your partner's* face is on the news."

The swelling had gone down some, but bruising and scrapes still made him look the monster in a Grade Z horror flick — particularly when he made a face, like he was doing now.

"Quarry, we *can't* stick. We just can't. We got five grand each out of what you did last night. Let's cut our losses and count ourselves lucky."

I flipped a hand. "Why don't we hold off till we see how the morning goes down? And then we can call the Broker and get his take."

He was shaking his head. "His take on you killing some colored drug dealer behind the target's place? After he hears that, you think you'll even still be on the Broker's team?"

That sent my brain a quick image of Boyd and me and others I'd encountered in Broker's network of damaged goods, all of us in basketball jerseys. With him as frustrated coach, yelling at the refs. But then I immediately realized the coach's way of benching me in this game would be to have my ass killed.

"No, Boyd. That's gotta be our little secret. Here's what we tell him. We woke up this morning, and learned to our dismay about the murder of one of the Reverend's staffers. An apparent drug deal gone wrong."

"Yeah," Boyd said thoughtfully, "Broker would wonder why you went over there last night, when you saw those lights on. Why *did* you go over there, Quarry?"

"You didn't question it last night."

"We didn't discuss it, really. You just did it."

How could I explain to Boyd that something in me wanted to make sure our target was part of the dope distribution ring operating out of his domain? How could I make him understand that I needed Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd to be dirty, to somehow deserve what we'd been hired to do to him?

How could I explain all that to Boyd if I couldn't explain it to myself?

"I had to make sure," I said, "that whatever was happening over

there wasn't a result of what went down at that Klan meeting."

Which sounded lame even to me, but Boyd let it pass.

Boyd and the sun were up before I was. I'd found him at the window in his half-turned position, one pillow under his ass, the other propped against the wall, as he used the binoculars. The portable radio, turned to the easy-listening station, was softly playing "The Good Life" by Bobby Darin.

"Anything yet?" I'd asked, barely awake.

"Not yet," he said.

That didn't surprise me. While André's body had surely been discovered by now, any cop cars would be along the side street in and near the alley, beyond our sight. And nobody got to the Coalition HQ till eight A.M. Plus, everybody who'd made the weekend trip had been told they could wander in as late as they liked. Even if that meant after lunch.

I'd crawled out of bed after a bracing three hours of sleep, took yet another shower, shaved, shat, and got into some of the few clothes of mine that weren't stuffed in a garbage bag ready to be dumped somewhere. Then I walked down to the Majestic, got us doughnuts and coffee, and walked back.

Around eight, the worker bees began arriving across the way, the usual mix of black and white, and mostly older staffers who had passed on the road trip. By eight-fifteen, a black Plymouth Fury made a parking place out of a yellow-curbed area near the front of Coalition HQ; it might as well have had UNMARKED POLICE CAR stenciled on the side, and the two lumpy-looking plainclothes cops in rumpled suits canceled any lingering doubt.

Boyd and I passed the binoculars around for half an hour, watching these obvious detectives get greeted first by a staffer and then by Harold Jackson, who took them deeper into the building than could be seen from our perch. Presumably back to his office and — assuming the Reverend had made it in by now — that office, as well.

Lowering the binoculars, Boyd said, "Shit."

"Nothing we didn't expect. Put those down. We have things to do."

"We do?"

"In a little while, you're going to call the Broker. Tell him our adjusted story about the drug-dealer killing across the way. Explain that I'll go in the office after lunch and deal with the detectives then, when they're getting tired of hearing what they're hearing. He'll know we can't skip that step before skipping, if that's what he wants us to do."

Boyd nodded. "And you?"

"I'm going downtown to the YMCA and make myself known. I'll

take that swim the Broker recommended. Either before or after that, I'll find a Dumpster to get rid of that garbage bag of bloody clothes. Probably find a department store to buy a few new clothes, since my wardrobe has been seriously depleted. I'll return here before I go across the street for a grilling, and see what the Broker advises."

"Okay," he said.

"It's barely possible the detectives will call in more troops to canvass the neighborhood. So don't answer the door, and turn that radio off. Nobody's home. Got it?"

"Got it."

And now I was back, and the Broker had advised that we stay, "if possible."

We were in the living room, on the couch.

I said, "Stay how long, did he say?"

"Till the job's done."

"Jesus, Boyd — they've seen me across the street. Everything I said about police sketches and my face getting famous still goes."

He shrugged, sitting sideways with one leg tucked under the other. "But it always did. Once you went undercover, you risked that, unless you could find a way to take the mark out without raising general suspicion. Accident or suicide or some shit."

I shook my head. "You should be doing the hit, not me. What I've been doing is the recon. You're still a new face. Fucking Broker. This is so fucked up."

Boyd swallowed, licked his lips; he really didn't like taking the active role. "You want *me* to do it? You see a way we can set this up? I mean, if that's what it takes—"

I shook my head again. "No. And we only have the rest of the week to bring it off. Dead white Nazis, dead black drug dealers... this is not like anything we've dealt with before."

His eyes were close enough to normal now to widen, though he still looked like Lon Chaney halfway through having his makeup removed. "Fuck the Broker. He's not on the fucking firing line. You wanna bail, Quarry, I'll bail."

"Not yet. We might as well see how this afternoon plays out."

I went in to Coalition HQ around eleven. The Reverend was in his office, on his phone, looking as cool as ever but for a vertical crease between his eyebrows indicating the pressure he was under. Jackson was out in the bullpen, hovering around, mother-henning his bummed-out staff and keeping an eye on the two lumpy cops, who were split up and moving from desk to desk doing interviews, pads and pencils in hand like carhops taking orders.

When he saw me, Jackson came right over.

"Jack," he said, "you just got here?"

I nodded.

"Are you aware of last night's tragedy?"

"What?"

He took me by the arm, walked me all the way back to the office. I glanced over at Ruth's desk. Empty. Then I was in the chair across from a shell-shocked Jackson, seated in his swivel chair, stroking his thick mustache nervously; even the shaved skull had lost its luster.

I sat forward. "Mr. Jackson, what's going on?"

He told me about the terrible discovery out back, in the alley, that had been made early this morning by Sanitation Department workers. That André Freeman, one of the Coalition's oldest, most respected staffers, had been found with his throat cut.

Oldest staffers, maybe. Respected? I didn't see anybody out at those desks who looked teary-eyed or heartbroken or anything. A little blindsided, maybe, and uneasy talking to cops — so what else was new?

"When I got here," Jackson was saying, "the back room was swarming with blue uniforms who'd let themselves in somehow. I couldn't catch the Reverend before he left home, so his drivers delivered him right into the middle of a three-ring circus, cops, lab techs, photographers. Those men out there in our work space are *interrogating* our people. Can you imagine?"

Didn't seem strange to me.

"No," I said, "I can't."

"And the worst part of is... I can tell this from the nature, the *tenor* of their questions... they think this is some kind of... *drug* deal. Drug deal gone wrong."

"No," I said.

"Obviously, that's not what it is."

"Obviously." What the fuck else could it be?

"This violence toward one of the Reverend's staff members," he said with a world-weary sigh, "indicates the extent of racial discontent in this community."

"You mean, that black people are discontented?"

"No! Well, of course, *certainly* black people are discontented. But what I mean is, the racists, the White Supremacist lunatics who would do to the Reverend what was done to Dr. King."

"Murder him, you mean."

He flinched at the word "murder," and his echo was whispered: "Assassinate him, yes. And this movement doesn't need another martyr. Did you hear about this neo-Nazi maniac, Starkweather, turning up dead this morning?"

"No."

And I hadn't. I mean, obviously, I knew he was dead, just not that

he turned up.

Jackson was saying, “He was found burned head to toe, shot in the head.”

“Found where?”

“Dumped behind the church where he preached, in Ferguson.”

“Wait, *Starkweather* was the preacher at that church?”

“Certainly.”

Had to hand it to the late Commander. He had a lot of things going.

“Obviously,” Jackson said, “he was murdered by one of his own people. These hate groups are highly competitive. His ‘Klavern’ was only one of several in the area, none sanctioned by the official Klan.”

“Well, the official Klan wouldn’t want to take on just anybody,” I said.

That stopped him for a moment, but he picked right up. “And of course it’ll be the black community that gets the blame for Starkweather’s much-deserved death. Which will stir up the race hate even more.” He paused dramatically. “And we have the big rally coming up this Saturday, with the Reverend as the main speaker. I personally think we should cancel, but he won’t hear of it.”

“You’ll need heightened security.”

“We’ll have it. Local, federal... but as a great man once said, ‘If history has taught us anything, it’s that anyone can be killed.’ ”

Truer words.

“What great man?” I asked.

“John F. Kennedy.”

I nodded. He would know.

I started to rise. “Well, you must have plenty to deal with without wasting time on a grunt like me...”

He held up a stop palm, half-rising himself. “No, Jack! Please sit down. I brought you back here to ask your help. To ask that you, in our time of crisis, go above and beyond the call of duty.”

I sat back down. “Okay. What exactly?”

He settled back in his chair, too. “The Reverend has two regular handlers... *bodyguards*, who I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

The two big black guys packing heat? Yeah, I’d noticed.

“Believe so,” I said.

“Well, you’re an ex-Marine. Bronze Star winner. I would imagine you can handle yourself. And know your way around a firearm.”

“I know which end to point.”

He flashed a smile but his eyes couldn’t have been more serious. “We could use some additional security ourselves, and you’re the only person on staff who qualifies. Would you be willing to go over to the Reverend’s home this evening, and essentially be a third bodyguard?”

"Glad to," I said.

"Should I see about getting you some kind of weapon?"

"I own a handgun. It's in my suitcase. I can use that."

"Well, Jack, that would be fine. But surely you aren't licensed in the state of Missouri...?"

I gave him half a smile. "I'm not licensed anywhere. But I'll risk it if you will. Should some son of a bitch make a move on the Reverend, and I have to shoot him? I have a hunch all will be forgiven."

He grinned, and got up and held out his hand, which was a very nice way to say I'd been dismissed.

I shook it, then at the door paused to say, "I'm gonna grab some lunch. Would you tell Friday and Gannon that I'll be back by one? To answer whatever questions they might have."

"Jack, I'd be happy to."

The two cops didn't notice me head out. They were busy, now that many of the staffers from the weekend trip were starting to drift in. No sign of Ruth yet.

I caught lunch, alone, at a place called the Ladle, where I had the chicken-pot-pie soup with a puff pastry floating on top. Very good, but this was another of these Central West End hippie-type joints — art glass, Goodwill furniture, church pews, colored tablecloths. I ate slowly, thinking, letting the comfort-food soup warm my belly and encourage my mind.

Like Duff's, the Ladle had indoor old-fashioned telephone booths, a row of four right out of a '40s train station. I'd come up with the beginnings of a plan, but it couldn't include Boyd. Not a double-cross, that's not my deal. But something that might work best single-o.

I closed myself in a booth and put in a collect call to the Broker. This time I did get some fucking flunky and so I had to sit in there and wait for him to get back to me.

I took the opportunity to reflect on how the money worked with the Broker, at least on a usual job, and this admittedly wasn't that. But generally he received a down payment from the client that covered his end and enough more to give Boyd and me — or any of his two-man teams (those basketball jerseys popped into my head again) — an advance.

I'd received five grand up front and I assumed Boyd the same. The rest of the payoff — Boyd's second five grand, and my twenty — would be made a night or two before the hit. Procedure was to call the Broker and report that everything was in place and the job about to go down. The Broker would contact the client, instruct him or her to make the drop, the client providing a time and place, of course, which would be passed along to me.

Finally the Broker called. "Yes?"

Was he a little peeved, hearing from Boyd and me so often on this contract? Was I interrupting a secretarial blow job? Was he playing cribbage at his club? Okay, so I don't know what cribbage is and didn't know what club that would be, but you get the drift.

"I found my window," I said.

Of course, I hadn't. But I was heading over to the Reverend's place tonight, wasn't I? And I bet the house had windows.

The Broker perked up. "Good, good. I was afraid, with this difficulty that cropped up..."

He meant the late André.

"...that you might not be able to deliver. Certainly Boyd, when he called this morning, indicated the possibility."

"No. I'll make it happen."

Maybe I would. Not sure yet. Still bobbing and weaving, when I should be floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee.

"So," he said, "this is the payoff call."

No pompous phraseology when we were this down-to-business.

"Yeah," I said. "I still have to go in the office and deal with the cops. You're sure my cover story will hold?"

"For now, yes. Long-term, of course, doubtful."

That meant no.

"Tell the client," I said, "to arrange the drop for me to pick it up tonight at four A.M."

"Why four A.M.?"

"I have things to do until then."

"Sounds like another busy night."

"I do try to make good use of my time."

We hung up.

Back at Coalition HQ, I found Ruth finally at her desk. But one of the detectives was interviewing her. I was on my way to my usual post when a hand wrapped around my arm. Not firm, not gentle.

I turned and looked into the beautiful if troubled, heart-shaped face of Mrs. Raymond Wesley Lloyd. Big brown eyes, apple cheeks, gentle slope of a nose, bright red-lipsticked full lips, lovely mahogany complexion, shoulder-length processed curls. She wore a fur-collared gray topcoat beneath which a black dress with pearls peeked.

"Excuse me, young man," she said. I had a hunch she might be twenty years older than me, but it might have only been ten. "Are you Mr. Blake?"

"John Blake, yes, ma'am."

She beamed, beautifully, but it didn't make the pain in her eyes go away. "Could I speak with you? Could we perhaps step outside?"

Nobody ever asked me to step outside so sweetly before.

"Absolutely," I said, and instinctively took her arm and stepped

outside into a chilly but not windy afternoon. Did I sense Ruth's eyes following us, or was that my imagination?

"Young man," she began, but I interrupted.

"Mrs. Lloyd," I said, "please make it 'Jack.' When a woman as lovely as you calls me 'young man,' I feel like the world has passed me by."

She gave me a wide white smile, and maybe her eyes weren't quite so sad now. Not quite.

"I'm going to impose on you," she said. "I don't know you at all, but I want to ask you something personal, if I may."

"Impose away."

She smiled again, but she'd put her dazzling white teeth away. "You were on the weekend campus trip."

"I was."

"I've heard from... my spies... that you and, uh, the young lady... Ruth... are something of an item."

"We've been spending some time together."

"Did you spend time together on the bus trip?"

"We did."

"Did she... did she spend any time with my husband?"

"She did not."

"You're quite sure?"

"Can you keep a secret, Mrs. Lloyd?"

"You have my word."

"I hate to kiss and tell, but Ruth and I spent the night."

Relief flooded her face. "Well... thank you. Though I hope I don't seem catty if I make *another* comment, which is that it doesn't surprise me she found someone to sleep with in such short order."

I grinned. "You have a right to that opinion, and I'm not offended. But if you knew me better, you'd realize with someone as irresistible as me, Ruth took a lot longer to fall into bed than is usual with the ladies."

That stunned her momentarily, then she smiled so wide it made her apple cheeks even fuller than before, and she tapped me on the chest lightly with a small fist.

"I believe you're telling me the truth," she said.

"Oh, I am. The females fall all over themselves trying to get next to me."

That made her laugh. No sadness in her eyes now.

I said, "By the way, you'll be seeing me tonight."

She frowned in confusion. "I will?"

"Yes, I'm going to be a house guest of yours, at least this evening. Because of these violent events, I've been added to your husband's security staff."

“That’s an excellent idea, Jack, but I won’t be there tonight. Because of this violence.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “Raymond is concerned for me. I’m staying with my sister tonight, away from the house. And…” She added this with a twinkle. “…apparently away from *temptation*, since you’ll be there.”

She pinched my cheek and went off down the sidewalk, smiling.

My good deed for the day. Perhaps I shouldn’t admit it, but this encounter was making me question the Reverend’s sanity. That was a woman any man could love, in all the word’s meanings.

I stepped back inside HQ and Ruth was right there, looking worried, even alarmed. “What was *that* about?”

“Oh, Mrs. Lloyd wondered if I was available for dating. I hated to disappoint, but I told her no. That you and I were going steady.”

She smiled big at that, but didn’t pinch my cheek. She did slap me on the chest, not gently, and say, “Oh *you*.”

Still, I was charming them left and right, wasn’t I?

I told Ruth about my addition to the Reverend’s bodyguard contingent and she was glad to hear it, but advised me to be careful.

She frowned. “You heard about that neo-Nazi in Ferguson? And poor André, right in our backyard?”

Back alley, actually, but I nodded.

She shook her head glumly. “When did America get so violent?”

“Right around the time,” I said, “my ancestors were throwing your ancestors into chains in the bottom of ships.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Good point. But do be careful. It’s getting crazy out there.”

“I noticed.”

Then one of the cops wanted to talk to me. The interview took three minutes. He was really impressed by my Bronze Star.

Fourteen

The Reverend lived in the Ville, a residential and business district just northwest of downtown. According to Ruth, it was for many decades an African-American cultural center, dating back to when the neighborhood was one of a handful where blacks could own houses and business properties, or even rent them.

"In that small area, of less than a square mile," she told me at Coalition HQ, "there were black businesses, schools, community groups, a hospital... stayed that way till maybe ten years ago."

"No kidding," I said.

I must not have seemed suitably impressed, because she added, "Chuck Berry and Tina Turner grew up there."

"Together?" I asked, and got another "Oh, you!" look out of her. Truth was, that was impressive.

But driving my Impala through this black neighborhood in the early evening, I wasn't impressed. At least not favorably. The Ville was pretty rough now. Buildings were tumbledown with windows boarded over, and junkies prowled the streets like rats looking for garbage cans.

The two-story white-trimmed red-brick house, however, was on a block where the homes were generally well-maintained. Sitting on a modest lot, the Lloyd residence had an open porch with a swing and a row of three windows above the overhang. A matching freestanding garage waited at the end of a cement drive. Out front the familiar black Grand Prix was parked.

Ruth said that the Reverend could afford to move out of the neighborhood, but he wanted to show solidarity with other residents of the Ville.

I pulled the Impala in behind the Grand Prix and got out and was soon up the brick steps and at the front door. The nine millimeter, which I'd been requested to bring, was in my waistband, under a new navy windbreaker; my light-blue sportshirt, jeans and sneakers were new as well. Nothing like getting drenched in blood to prompt freshening up your wardrobe.

The big black guy who answered the door was familiar to me from Coalition HQ. This imposing figure was Terrell, who with his associate, Deon, did more than just help chauffeur and bodyguard the Reverend — they also played cards and listened to soul music in the back room. Good gig.

Terrell had a head the size of a gallon paint can, only more rounded, with hair cut close to the scalp; he sported a Rosie Greer goatee. He wore the standard black undertaker suit with a dark blue

tie, his expression narrow-eyed and glowering, but that was misleading. Really he was a pussycat. A pussycat with a .45 automatic under his arm.

"Jackie boy," he said in a friendly growl, the corners of the wide mouth turning up slightly. "I hear you gonna run interference for brother Deon and me, that it?"

"More like quarterback," I said.

He smirked and let me in. "Careful you don't get rushed."

The vestibule opened onto an area with a hardwood floor shared by a staircase and a hallway back to the kitchen. Open doors were on my either side, study and dining room, plaster walls a pale green, woodwork handsome and dark. This house had been built a long time ago, early in this century, by fine craftsmen for somebody with dough.

Terrell abandoned me to go into the dining room, where his "brother" Deon was waiting. I didn't know whether Deon was really his brother or just a brother in the other sense.

In the medium-sized study, the Reverend — in rolled-up shirtsleeves and black-framed glasses — sat at an ancient walnut desk with a dark leather top, writing in longhand on bond paper. Wadded-up balls of the stuff surrounded a wastebasket nearby. Built-in floor-to-ceiling shelves bore books, not fancy leather-bound stuff for show, but hardcovers and paperbacks of assorted vintage with a worn look, somewhat haphazardly stacked. A working office. He did not acknowledge my presence. That was nothing new — the best I'd ever got from him at HQ was a nod.

The somewhat formal dining room, with china cabinet and sideboard, was set up for Terrell and Deon, who were not sleep-in help — like me, they were here for security concerns born out of André's passing. Him, and the dead Nazi who turned up in a church parking lot.

That I got rid of both those pricks would have come as quite a shock to Terrell and Deon, and the Reverend, too. But not as big a one as the noise suppressor tucked down in my left windbreaker pocket.

Is that a silencer or are you just glad to see me?

The two massive men were playing gin rummy at one end of the long dining-room table; Deon, a little bigger than Terrell, modest Afro, no beard, was keeping score. Mid-table like a centerpiece, sat a small portable TV with rabbit ears with an extension cord trailing off; right now *Laugh-In* was on, Arte Johnson in a German army helmet saying, "Very interesting... but stupid."

Without looking at me, Deon asked, "You eat?"

"Now and then."

"Smart-ass white boy," Deon said, but he was smiling. Also a pussycat. Also packing a .45, which was obvious because his black

suitcoat was hung over the back of his chair, the shoulder-holstered weapon out in the open.

Terrell said, “Colonel Sanders in the kitchen.”

“No shit?” I said. “This I got to see.”

As I went back to the kitchen, I heard Deon say, “Smart-ass white boy” again.

About a third of the Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket was gone, but I found a breast. Original recipe, which is my preference. I held it with a napkin, having been raised well, and checked the refrigerator for something to drink — fucking Budweiser again and, damn it, Pepsi. Some days you can’t win. I took a can of the pop anyway.

I went back to the dining room, standing just inside the open double-doorway, nibbling my chicken, occasionally sipping the Pepsi.

I said, “Don’t you fellas know eating chicken is a racist stereotype?”

“What *you* eating?” Deon asked, writing down the latest scores.

“Well, you have a point. But I prefer Popeye’s.”

“Naw, you fool, that’s spinach.”

“No, really. Few months ago, I ate at one in New Orleans. You wait. You’ll be lining up.” I had another bite of chicken, the batter better than the banter. “I’m gonna take a stroll around the house, get the layout down. Mrs. Lloyd gone for the night?”

Both men nodded, looking at their cards.

“No children at home?”

“Children, boy and girl, growed and gone,” Terrell said. He looked up and smiled, showing off his one gold tooth. Funny how a face that has a natural glower can brighten like that. “Take your tour and come back, Jackie boy. Three of us, we can play some poker.”

“Poker? Well, all right, but could one of you nice men teach me the rules? And I’m afraid I don’t have any change. Can we play for dollars?”

Deon said, “Oh, I gonna watch *his* ass when he deal the cards.”

I went upstairs. Master bedroom, good-size bathroom, guest room, bedroom with school sports trophies, another with blue ribbons for instrumental music (flute). College graduation photos framed on a dresser in each.

Downstairs, in addition to the dining room and study and another bath, a TV room was off the kitchen, a mud room off that. The basement wasn’t finished, though the washer and dryer were down there, and furnace of course, tool bench, storage boxes, windows too small to crawl in. A fairly typical middle-class, maybe upper-middle-class home. Nothing to indicate a nationally prominent figure lived here.

From a strategic standpoint, the only ways in were the front and

back doors. With the exception of the windows off the front porch, the others were too high up on the house to be a threat.

I returned to the dining room and said, “I’m gonna pass on the poker, fellas. One of us ought to be watching that back door.”

They looked at each other like my proposed tactic was Einstein revealing $E = mc^2$. Well, they were bodyguards, not Special Forces.

“Good idea, Jackie boy,” Terrell said. “You do that little thing.”

I said sure and was heading out when Deon advised, “Make sure that back door locked up tight!”

“Good place to start,” I said.

If you’re wondering, the back door was already locked, or anyway the one onto the mud room was — the kitchen door had no lock. Not that I was expecting anybody to come in any door. After all, the fox was already in the henhouse. And I was the fox.

Wasn’t like Delmont was about to come charging in to carry out his contract. Even if he were alive, he’d wait for the Saturday rally, to give his racist client more bang for the buck. And here I sat, at the target’s kitchen table, my nine millimeter in my pants, having another cold breast of original-recipe chicken, getting by on Pepsi, marveling at how easy they were making it for me.

Just screw on the silencer, take out the card-playing bodyguards — two nine-millimeter hiccups should do it — and then swing around and pop the Reverend at his desk, and beat it out the back door and around to the Impala and gone. Take maybe forty-five seconds. About as hard as reaching in the Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket for another piece.

Which I did.

The only tricky thing was that several staffers at Coalition HQ, including Jackson and Ruth, knew I was going to the Ville to help babysit the Reverend this evening. That meant going in tomorrow with a story — how I’d arrived and found everybody already tragically dead — or splitting the scene post-hit tonight, and taking my chances.

The former meant getting looked at by the cops a lot harder than I had been this afternoon. The latter meant holing up in my A-frame up north in the cold waiting for the heat to subside. Yes, they’d have police sketches, but nothing else, and if these looks of mine were any more average, I’d forget who that was in the mirror when I shaved mornings.

Hop in the Impala and split. Then wait it out. Curl up by my fireplace, counting my twenty-five grand. *Thirty* grand, counting my half of Delmont’s payday.

Of course, I hadn’t collected that twenty-five grand yet, had I? That was set for a few hours from now. And did I really want to pull the job *before* the payoff?

Which suggested another possibility: stay in town one more day, decline doing guard duty at the house tomorrow for whatever reason... and come back after dark to do the deed, having, as we criminals say, cased the joint.

I could pretty much count on Terrell and Deon resuming their card-playing in the dining room. Maybe a little chancy counting on the Reverend to still be working on whatever it was he was writing. But a knock on the back door tomorrow night would summon someone, no matter who in the house it was, who would not be alarmed to find my familiar face on the back stoop. Someone who would be dead before it occurred to him he'd misjudged.

Only... what if Mrs. Lloyd returned tomorrow?

While I wasn't thrilled by the idea of taking Terrell and Deon out, they were guys with guns in a job with risks. Mrs. Lloyd, however, was just a nice married lady, and very beautiful, which made it a shame. I was not at all anxious to add her to the collateral-damage list.

Of course, tomorrow I could probably ascertain at HQ whether Mrs. Lloyd was still at her sister's or not.

"Mind if I join you?"

The resonant bass voice belonged to the master of the house, the Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd, poised in the doorway between hall and kitchen. Still in his rolled-up shirtsleeves but with his black-framed glasses M.I.A., he looked haggard, or anyway as haggard as that well-carved African mask of a face could.

"Please," I said, and gestured to the chair next to me at the kitchen table.

The Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket was between us on the table with a stack of napkins near it. He first went to the fridge and got himself a Budweiser and returned and selected a thigh from the bucket — about all that was left that was worth eating.

He had a sip of Budweiser, made a face, and said, "Well, isn't that vile. I only stock it because it's what the fellas like."

Terrell and Deon.

We sat quietly eating chicken until we were both finished and wiping our fingers at the same time. I'd started first but his piece was smaller.

"Sometimes," he said, giving the remains of the thigh a satisfied smile, "it just can't be helped — fried chicken just really hits the bull's-eye."

Hits the bull's-eye.

He folded his hands, as if getting ready to say grace *after* the meal. "You're Mr. Blake. I'm afraid I've been negligent where you're concerned."

"You have?"

He nodded. He was very black in that way that makes some white people uneasy. Not me particularly. Maybe when I was younger and too stupid to know better. Or maybe he just reminded me of somebody I'd known well, somebody who had flushed whatever residual prejudice I might have had out of my system.

His sigh damn near ruffled the curtains over the sink. "I've been busy, Mr. Blake. Preoccupied. I want to do everything I can to see that the right man gets into the White House this time around."

"Afraid it's an uphill battle, Reverend."

He smiled, the whiteness of his teeth almost startling against that smooth black skin. "Why don't you call me Raymond... and is John all right?"

"Make it Jack."

He leaned back in the kitchen chair, folded his arms. "Oh, I know. 'Raymond,' not 'Ray,' must sound pompous. I admit to a streak of that. But my momma used to call me 'Ray Ray,' and it stuck and all my friends got to calling me that, and I hated it. Grown man called Ray Ray." He shivered at the thought, then smiled again. "So you'll have to put up with calling me Raymond."

"Okay, Raymond."

"And you're right, it's an uphill battle. McGovern comes across weak when really he's strong, and then there was that lousy break with his V.P. pick."

The guy McGovern had chosen for vice-president had a hidden history of mental problems, including electroshock therapy and suicide attempts. He'd had to replace the guy with a Kennedy in-law.

"What I've been meaning to say to you," he said, his dark eyes holding me so tight it was as if his hands were doing it, "is that I greatly appreciate you joining this campaign. Coming on board like you have. I'm aware of your military service, and I value that service, beyond anything you might be doing for the Coalition."

"Thank you, sir."

Half a smile formed. "You may lose respect for me when I tell you that I didn't serve. I tried to. But I was a felon, and they wouldn't take me. That was what you'd call a wake-up call. I was already clean, but the bad things I'd done... well, there's always a price to be paid, isn't there?"

"There is."

"I have to admit that I came around to realizing I'd been lucky not to go. That Vietnam was a bad war, an immoral war, but I came to that realization from a distance. You were on the scene, Jack."

When the VC rushed Hill 55, trying to take out the First Division Sniper Platoon, I found myself in my first firefight. I'd never seen anything

like it, never been in anything like it, but my buddy Bill helped me survive it. He was killing them as fast as they came at us, and while I only froze up for what was probably seconds, that was long enough for Bill to take that bullet for me. Bill Young, who never got older. He had that blacker-than-black skin, too. The red stood out so vividly on flesh like that.

"It means so much to us," Lloyd said, "having you stand beside us. Providing us with the credibility you bring to the protest." He unfolded his arms, leaned elbows on the table, raised a palm as if he were swearing in at court. "Now I understand that you don't feel comfortable with public speaking, that you don't want to be singled out. But I wish you'd reconsider, Jack... though I will respect your decision otherwise."

"I'll think on it, sir."

"Please, just... Raymond." He swigged some more Bud; he was getting used to it. Funny what you can get used to. "And, uh... about you and Ruth..."

He'd shifted gears so fast I could hear them grind.

That resonant voice became more intimate. "She's a wonderful young woman, Ruth. I'm glad to see that you two are... getting along so well."

He'd been keeping a closer eye on me than I could ever have imagined.

Too casually, he asked, "Has she... has Ruth... discussed with you...?"

"I'm aware of your relationship, Raymond."

He lowered his gaze. "I can tell that you disapprove. You were talking to my wife, earlier."

Jesus!

"Marianne is a wonderful woman," he said, his smile sad now. "The best wife, the best mother... and, I don't have to tell you, lovely. So very lovely, and I am so very lucky. But I am weak and the Lord is strong."

"That's quite a cop-out."

Another half-smile. "Yes, I suppose it is. I grew up on hard streets, but that's no excuse. I was sold poison and later I sold poison. My life in those days was all about two things — poison and pussy. I shook the first habit, but I've always had that weakness for the second."

Maybe I was nobody to judge.

"Of course, Jack, after a while, riding the horse, you don't even *care* about pussy. Just that spike in your arm. If they hadn't busted me, I'd be long dead. If I hadn't met Jesus in prison, I'd be dead, too."

I resisted asking what Jesus was in for.

"In a lot of ways... in most ways, if I might brag a little... I have turned my life around. I serve the Lord and serve my black brothers

and sisters. You know, I do a lot of traveling, Jack. When I'm home, with Marianne at my side, around me here at home, I might be tempted but I never give in. But when I'm on the road, spreading what I hope is a message of faith and freedom and non-violence, away sometimes for weeks... I have on occasion... slipped. With Ruth, her keen intelligence and her remarkable beauty..."

Not necessarily in that order.

"...I was too weak to resist. I'm struggling now, to hold onto my marriage. I told Ruth what we had just had to be over, that it could not go on, and she was hurt, of course... but at the same time she has been understanding. More than I could ever hope. But Marianne is *still* hurt, so terribly hurt, and I have so much rebuilding to do. So I tell you, frankly, that it's a relief to see Ruth with a nice young man like yourself."

Okay, this was a little creepy. He was basically saying, *Thanks for fucking my girlfriend so I can maybe get back with my wife.* But he had a way of making it sound noble. With that voice, and all that damn charisma, he could read you a grocery list and you'd say, "Right on, brother!"

I'd had enough of this, so I asked, "What are you working on so hard in your study?"

"What am I writing? My speech for Saturday. It's so very important. Missouri could be in McGovern's column, I just *know* it could. And the eyes of America will be on us — the media's taking a great interest." He sighed. "It's just too bad such a dark cloud hangs over us now, what with André's death."

"He didn't die of a heart attack, Raymond. His throat was slit. That was a drug deal gone wrong. With your background, surely you must know that."

He nodded, his expression grave. "André saved my life in prison. Do you know what that feels like?"

His name was Bill Young.

"Yes," I said.

"I tell you, André took the Lord into his heart, too. He was born again inside that terrible place. I thought he'd really straightened himself out, broken out of his personal prison. I've tried to help. Given him a place, a role, where he could become a different person, a *good* person."

"But he stayed the same person, didn't he, Raymond? I spotted him the first afternoon at the Coalition. In country..." Nam. "...I was around a lot of guys using, as you might suspect. And he had all the signs."

Lloyd was shaking his head, not looking at me. "I know, I know... and his death will dredge up all of my past. Turn it from something I

triumphed over into a wretched thing that will make people think I am still part of that world."

"But you're not?"

The question surprised him. Maybe hurt him.

"Of course not, Jack." He swallowed, looked away. "But the timing is unfortunate. After the speech, it was my intention... well, never mind."

"After the speech what?"

His shrug was barely perceptible. "I was about to clean house. Staffers have reported... *suspicious* behavior... and I'd resolved to let André go. And someone else has to go, too, but I'd rather not go into that. It's too... hurtful."

I knew who that someone must be.

"Raymond," I said, "when you say you planned to cut them loose... would you have handed them over to the police or the federal authorities?"

"I would have cut ties with André and his co-conspirator. And I would have shared my *suspicions* with the authorities, yes. The sooner they could be stopped, the better. Street drugs are a kind of self-genocide for my people, Jack. The one thing my sorry background does for me is that I can speak with authority on this subject. When the presidential campaign is over... well, a major change will be made at the Coalition. That I promise you."

He offered me his hand and I took it and shook it.

"Thank you, Jack," he said, getting up. "I mean that most sincerely. And thank you for the frank talk."

He put the empty Bud can in the trash and headed back to his study to work on the speech.

He was right to thank me.

I had decided not to kill him.

But somebody else wouldn't be so lucky.

Fifteen

Three in the morning wasn't the best time to take in St. Louis' Forest Park, its fourteen-hundred or so acres home to several museums, a planetarium and a famous zoo — unless a lack of company was what you were after. The municipal theater would be empty, the golf courses and tennis courts and boathouse, too. No one was likely to be taking in any of the statues or paying respects at memorials, either.

That made me a rare moonlight visitor to the park's Korean War Memorial, a giant floral clock maybe thirty-five feet in diameter, formed by thousands and thousands of colorful flowers, mums and sunflowers and more, looking muted in the full moon's glow, like a hand-tinted photograph, and spelling out below

HOURS AND FLOWERS SOON FADE AWAY.

Curving around the memorial were a number of stone benches to sit and reflect. Also a number of substantial evergreens to stand behind and wait.

Nearby was the fifty-foot high, glass-walled, steel-skeletoned, stone-fronted Art Deco greenhouse known as the Jewel Box, a big tourist destination and frequent site for weddings; but not at three in morning. My instructions had been to enter the park from Hampton Avenue, take a right on Wells Drive to a round-about where the Jewel Box would be on my left. That promise had been kept. The money would be waiting at four A.M. That promise, not just yet.

Of course, I was an hour early.

Ninety minutes ago or so, I'd still been at the Reverend's home in the Ville, seated at the kitchen table, watching that back door as promised. Two more cans of Pepsi were in me, and I was a little caffeine-wired.

I had seen Deon stumble into the TV room, yawning, half an hour before. Now, after a good healthy piss, I checked on him, and found him sacked out on his belly on a sofa that was barely as big as he was. It looked like he'd been dropped there from a plane.

I peeked in the study, where even more crumpled-up pages surrounded the wastebasket, and found Reverend Lloyd also asleep on a sofa, a brown leather one; he was on his back, like a guy in a coffin, only breathing. How easy it would have been to pop him.

Terrell was still in the dining room, leaned forward with his big head on his big arms like a kid resting in class, snoring more softly

than you'd expect. On the TV, Mantan Moreland was driving his boss around ("Mr. Chan! Mr. Chan!"), and one of the not-as-smart-as-Mantan sons. Must be showing those late every night.

I slipped out the back, leaving the door unlocked, which was not exactly stellar bodyguard work but I wanted to be able to return. With luck nobody would notice I'd been gone, and if they did, I'd come up with some kind of story. Like I'd heard somebody out back and followed them somewhere or maybe went for a wee-hours breakfast or some bull.

The first phone booth I spotted, I pulled the Impala over and made the call to the Broker. No flunky this time — the man himself picked up on the first ring. He gave me the drop location and the payoff instructions. They were simple enough.

Now I was tucked behind a tree, smelling pine needles, with my Impala parked along one of the smaller curving roadways about a quarter mile away. Of course I'd checked the bench the money was supposed to be left under, not expecting to find anything and I didn't. Though it varied, what typically went down was the client arrived with the cash no more than an hour (and often as little as ten or fifteen minutes) before I was to pick it up. Make the drop and get the hell out.

The point was for the client not to come in contact with me or somebody like me. Such drops were routinely middle-of-the-night, nobody-likely-to-be-around affairs, so the risk of leaving a box or a bag of money unattended for a short while was minimal.

What the client didn't know, and what the Broker surely must have, was that a guy like me wasn't going to accept a risk like that, minimal or not. Either I or my partner would always go early, find a vantage point and watch, picking up the package as soon as the client had cleared the scene.

The night was cool and just a little breezy. Still in the windbreaker, I was comfortable enough, but with all these trees and bushes around for the wind to ruffle, I got to thinking, every whipstitch, that I heard something suspicious.

I didn't have long to wait. About three-thirty, he showed up, wearing a black raincoat and a black fedora, looking about as subtle as a bad guy in one of those Charlie Chan movies. He was carrying a black bag like doctors used to when they made house calls — Gladstone bag? Whatever, he was half-kneeling and tucking it under the bench when I came up behind him and said, "Starting to feel like fall, Mr. Jackson. Perfect football weather, don't you think?"

He rose, still clutching the bag in his gloved fist, whirling toward me, eyes wide, brow knit. "What the hell is—"

"Nothing to be worried about," I said, left hand raised like a

traffic cop about to blow a whistle. “We’re just going to sit down here and have a nice little chat.”

My words didn’t diminish his alarm. He could easily see the nine millimeter in my right hand, which had to be troubling for him even though I held it down at my side, the extended noise-suppressor snout touching my jeans well below my knee.

He did not sit down. He swallowed, forced his expression to smooth out, and said easily, “Mr. Blake, I can’t *believe* you’re here.”

Yet here I was.

“This,” he continued, “is a major breach. You know goddamn well I was guaranteed *not* to have *any* direct contact with... with you.”

He was choosing his words carefully. Despite the silenced weapon at my side, I could be an undercover cop wearing a wire, as far as he knew.

“The reason I insist we talk,” I said, “is I suspect you committed a breach of contract yourself. If you can satisfy me that you haven’t, I’ll just fade away. If I’m not satisfied, I will contact my middleman and he will decide where we go from here.”

Alarm had been replaced with confusion. “And what then? Will the contract be carried out or not?”

“Let’s sit and talk.”

He frowned, gestured around us. “Out here in the open like this? Are you out of your mind?”

I hate two-part questions.

“It’s after three-thirty A.M.,” I said. “No security walks these grounds. Maybe a cop car will go by at some point. So what? We’re not easily visible from the street, and as long as one of us isn’t on his knees in front of the other one, we don’t look like we’re breaking any laws. Can we please sit?”

We sat.

“You put me in a bad position, Mr. Jackson.”

He was not looking at me, staring straight ahead, across the floral clock and into the trees. “How is that?”

“Things have been going on that I didn’t know about. That I *should* have known about. You took out a second contract, didn’t you? That must have required a few steps, and fancy ones, because I don’t think the people you hired would have taken something on directly from a nigger...”

Now he looked at me, eyes blazing.

“...as they would crudely put it. Funny, thinking of you doing business with Nazi types, KKK clowns. Because I think, and this is just my reading of it and I’m no expert, that you’re sincere about your activism.”

He looked away again, across the trees, his jaw firm. “Of course

I'm sincere."

I shook my head, smiled a little. "You've had to play second-fiddle to Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd for a lot of years. You, a skilled public speaker yourself. You, who are not naive like the Reverend is. You *know* that sometimes corners have to be cut. That the ends have to justify the means — like raising money by trafficking in the same illegal drugs that the Reverend has worked so hard to fight. I mean, it's not like dope is going away — not until a lot of things change in this country. And that's a gradual thing, right?"

He sighed. Then he turned the dark eyes on me, and very quietly he said, "The Coalition is going broke. We face bankruptcy. Donations and speaking fees and those modest book advances and royalties — we can't function on that paltry income. Something had to be done. Something *has* to be done."

I nodded. "Oh, I get it. I see it. Utilize the Reverend's prison pal, André, who on his own had slid back into old bad habits, let's say... and use him to do some *sub rosa* fund-raising. Just a temporary thing, till the coffers get filled. But that isn't enough, is it? As long as Reverend Lloyd is around, with his pesky morality and his annoying Christianity, you simply cannot keep the Coalition funded."

He stroked his mustache with a thumb and middle finger. "I don't see why this is any of your concern."

"Here's a hint: *it's my ass on the line*. You have the skills and the vision and lack of ethics needed to take the Coalition into solvency and on to the next level. You've got the perfect plan — transform Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd from a pain in your ass into a superstar martyr. Everybody says he's the next Martin Luther King. You mean to finish the job."

His upper lip curled. "Am I being lectured by a fucking assassin?"

I held up the traffic cop palm again. "I know, I know. I seem out of line. And I understand why you acted so desperately... yes, desperately. You knew or strongly suspected that the Reverend was on to you. And I spoke to him earlier tonight, when I was doing bodyguard duty in the Ville — and found you were right. Lloyd was planning to sack both you and André after the big speech Saturday — still plans to oust you. But he doesn't want any bad publicity to harm the good he hopes to do with that speech. He thinks, he *really* thinks... and I guess this proves you're right, thinking the Reverend has his head up his ass... that George McGovern is gonna be our next president. I have the political savvy of a hedgehog, and *I* can see it's ridiculous."

He swallowed. His eyes were hooded now. "When did you know... that I...?"

"That you're our client? Not as soon as you picked me out as the

probable hitter. After which, you made it all too easy for me. You paved the way for me to join the team, really rolled out the welcome wagon. You made sure I was along on the weekend campus trip, even got me a room by myself so I wouldn't be hampered if I decided that DeKalb was the place where the Reverend needed to die. And when you said you wouldn't put up with dope smoking on the campus trip, you sounded a little too knowledgeable — 'mowing grass,' 'blasting a joint.' Oh, and you being the guy who makes all those arrangements, the campus bookings and so on... plus the ranking guy riding on the bus... that made me think you just about *had* to be arranging the drug deals that André was carrying out."

His eyebrows went up. "And from that you *knew* I was the client?"

"Any doubt that you were went the fuck away when you arranged for me to 'guard' the Reverend at his house tonight. And let me tell you, it would've been an easy hit. And it'd be easy tomorrow night, too."

He looked confused again. "What do you want... more money?"

I shrugged. "My middleman may demand more — you may get penalized for your breach. Speaking of which... let's deal with that. Deal with how you got on my bad side and turned me into this windy prick you're having to listen to."

"Why don't we," he muttered.

"You had a deadline coming up, remember? After the Saturday speech, you were getting shitcanned. Your way around that was to have the Reverend killed running up to the speech, so you could take his place and eulogize him. *You had a dream* — and it was assassinating the Reverend. You know, I have to hand it to you. I've killed my share, more than my share, of bastards for other bastards... but never one who planned to cry crocodile tears over the body, and make a dead hero out of it so that a whole movement could be built up around the deceased."

He was breathing hard, the rage difficult to keep in. "Take your money, and do your job. I don't want to hear any more of your opinions. Your disapproval is laughable. I did not breach *shit*, Mr. Blake. The money is right here."

He patted the bag between us.

I unsnapped the thing, opened it up, and found packets of crisp, fresh bills with five-hundred-dollar bank wrappers. I counted fifty of them. I took one random packet and thumbed it — twenty-five twenty-dollar bills.

"Right on the money," I said.

"Are we done here?"

"One last thing. That breach."

"*What* fucking breach?"

"Hiring a second contract, remember? You have everything riding on not getting fired by the Reverend until after the rally speech Saturday. So you decide that you need a back-up. If for some reason Lloyd doesn't go down before the rally, he will have to die *during* the rally, while he's speaking. Think of the drama, with you holding him in your arms, and getting his blood all over you. That would be an image that would become goddamn historic. And the hillbilly hitman would likely be killed or captured, and you've arranged it so that it would impossible to trace back to you. Anyone who suggested such a thing would just be another silly conspiracy freak."

The eyes were so hooded now, they were almost shut. "Suppose that's true, Mr. Blake. How does it impact you?"

"It impacts me because the hillbilly, in the course of doing his job, noticed us and took us for interlopers. He was ready to kill me, and my partner, and that kind of thing just rubs me the fuck the wrong way."

"I... I never anticipated that."

"Oh I know. But did you anticipate this?"

I raised the nine millimeter and its endless silenced snout angled up at him, and his eyes were huge as he looked into its tiny mouth.

He spoke quickly: "Listen to me, Blake — it was just a fallback. Had you successfully removed Raymond, I would have called *off* the second contract."

"Here's my fallback. I take the money, I kill you, and with the client dead, the hit becomes a moot point, and I don't have to shoot a man who's better than either one of us."

His arms went up, as if he were a ref calling a play, and out of the trees they came, his two white gangster pals, the ones I'd seen in the alley with André. Their hats flew off and their topcoats flapped as they ran right at me, the big guy with the pasta-fat face and his slender superior, mustached and looking like he was playing Nathan Detroit in a Muny production of *Guys and Dolls*. They were absurdly old-fashioned gangsters, yet not laughable at all, not with those big automatics that were firing at me, breaking the silence of the night into loud little pieces.

I hit the deck, hard, the cement scraping my elbow right through the windbreaker, and the running men were shifting their aim when Boyd came out from behind his tree and shot them both down into tumbling piles of dead.

On my feet now, I looked over at Jackson, whose small mouth was forming the kind of big hole you scream out of, only he remained silent. He had lowered his hands to chest level and his eyes begged for the mercy he himself was incapable of granting.

Boyd was out there, long-barreled revolver in hand, checking the bodies.

“Hey!” I called.

“You’re welcome,” he said. He was in a black sweatshirt and black jeans.

“Now him,” I said, pointing at Jackson. “With one of their guns!”

Jackson flew to his feet, as I stepped away from the bench with the bag in hand. Boyd shot four times and only one of the shots hit, but it was in the forehead, so that did the trick. Jackson sat back down on the bench in that effortless way only a corpse has.

Bringing Boyd in meant I’d have to split my twenty grand with him, and come up with some half-assed reason why there was extra in the bag. But people are never hard to convince when they’re getting more money than they thought.

Anyway, after last night, I was happy just to wind up without blood all over me.

Sixteen

As expected, the Broker called off the job.

He did so immediately after I gave him the news of our client's death. Of course, the story I told him wasn't the one you've just heard — what he got was that two white accomplices of Jackson's had tried to steal the payoff loot, and everybody got shot for their trouble.

Everybody, that is, but Boyd and me, who had helped ourselves to the bag of cash the client had brought.

"How did it happen," the Broker asked me on the phone, "that you and Boyd were there when the money was delivered?"

"Too much crazy shit had gone down for us not to be," I said, nestled in one of the phone booths at Duff's. "Like that hick who dropped in on us..." Delmont. "...and that drug dealer who got killed in that alley." André.

"You felt," he said, "the need to exert some caution."

"Yup. And I'm exerting some more by sticking for a few days — to keep John Blake from attracting undue official attention."

"Probably wise. But, Quarry — stay alert."

"Will do. Listen, should it come up, I split the payoff with Boyd."

"Why is that?"

"I just felt like he earned it as much as I did. Since the job never really came off."

"Ah. A man with a conscience."

"Let's not get carried away, Broker."

To this day, I'm not sure the Broker really believed what I told him about what happened at the Korean War Memorial near the Jewel Box; but he pretended to, and it never came up again.

And I did return to the Lloyd house in the Ville, after the Forest Park payoff drop. Nobody had noticed I was gone. I returned with breakfast rolls and coffee, carrying in the built-in alibi I hadn't needed. I was still there when the Reverend got the call about his "friend" Jackson's body being discovered near the floral memorial.

As for Boyd, he was able to fly out that morning. I dropped him at the airport but he was already flying high.

"Boy," he said, "that job couldn't have gone smoother."

"Really?"

"Great surveillance pad, we don't even have to go through with the job, and wind up way in the black."

I didn't have the heart to remind him of certain little bumps in the road — like two Nazi country boys jumping me, Delmont beating him senseless, a KKK Klavern chasing me across an open field. Then there was me getting splashed with blood — more like in the red than

the black — and him shooting it out with St. Louis hoodlums before assuming the active role and finishing Jackson off.

Funny how we only remember the good things.

I wound up staying on at Coalition HQ only for two more days. The first was mostly taken up by a replay of those same two cops coming around and asking all the staffers, myself included, minor variations on the questions they'd asked after André's killing. The second day was really only a morning, because right away the Reverend gathered everybody back by his office and, essentially, said goodbye.

Standing beside him was his somber but ever-radiant wife, in a black-trimmed white dress with a white corsage. She might have been going to a funeral. Or the prom.

"We have been forced to prematurely shut down our get-out-the-youth-vote campaign," the Reverend said, the resonant voice lacking its usual fire. "The organizers of Saturday's rally have asked me not to speak, in light of the various tragedies, as well as what has come out about Harold Jackson and André Freeman, and... well, I don't have to go over the embarrassing, disheartening details that you've all read and heard in the media."

Then with obvious sincerity and a good deal of warmth, he thanked them for their dedication and hard work, adding, "I will be regrouping in the near future, with a smaller staff. Our mission of non-violence, education, and brotherhood... and sisterhood... continues."

They all applauded, wildly at first, but rather quickly ran out of steam.

Smiling, he took his wife's white-gloved hand and said, "In the light of so much tragedy and disappointment, I am pleased to give you some happy news. My new chief administrative assistant will be Mrs. Marianne Lloyd."

That got a nice round of applause, too, and Mrs. Lloyd gave her own little speech about being proud to join her husband in the fight.

"My children are grown," she said, "but the world they live in could still use some work. And Raymond and I are both ready to roll up our sleeves."

A little more applause, and then everyone went about emptying their desks and filling boxes that had thoughtfully been provided.

My desk didn't have anything in it, so I helped Ruth. She was in the same maroon vest, matching pants and navy blouse as the first day. Same hoop earrings, too.

She gave me a glum smile and said, "So what do you think, John? Will I be offered a position on the Reverend's new scaled-down staff?"

"No. But you weren't going to stay on anyway. You're just pouting."

Her smile lost its glumness. “They say the truth hurts, but when it comes out of *your* mouth, it just makes me smile.”

“I was put here to spread joy. You know, we really should celebrate.”

“Celebrate? Celebrate what?”

“Not having to go to a dull rally this Saturday.”

Of course, she had no idea how un-dull it might have been.

“Okay,” she said, “so we celebrate. Any ideas?”

Within two hours, we had piled into the Impala SS and headed for the Lake of the Ozarks and a resort where I’d stayed last year after a job.

That evening, in bed, after making love in the glow of a fire, she snuggled up and said, “They’re going to blow up my building.”

“What?”

“*Our* building, Mother’s and my sisters’ and mine. At Pruitt-Igoe. The whole dangerous, rat-ridden place is coming down, which is for the best. But some of it stayed nice. It was home. And now I need someplace else for my mother and me and the girls.”

“Your mom is welcome here at the lodge. In her own room.”

Ruth grinned. “And my sisters?”

“How old were they again?”

She batted my chest playfully and said, “Thanks for your concern, Jack, but we’ll find something. I’ve applied at several law firms and, with any luck, we’ll be able to afford someplace really nice.”

“You deserve it.”

The last evening of our stay, McGovern lost. It hadn’t taken long. We’d been watching in our room and she switched off the set with the remote, saying she had no stomach for any network post-mortems.

We were back in bed when she said, “Now another four years of Nixon. Doesn’t that suck.”

I said I supposed it did.

But I wasn’t thinking about the next four years. I was enjoying the right now of sharing a bed with a beautiful woman, getting daily rubdowns, plenty of swims, taking long walks in the woods. Scarfing down delicious food, too. Life sucked less suddenly.

Hadn’t I managed not to kill the Reverend Raymond Wesley Lloyd and still get paid for it?

Felt good doing something nice for a change. Or maybe felt nice doing something good for a change.

You tell me.

Author's Note

I wish to thank my son and daughter-in-law, Nathan and Abby Collins of St. Louis, Missouri, for answering my location questions and pointing me toward research materials. That said, the St. Louis of this novel is one of my imagination and any blame for geographical blundering is my own, with no apologies forthcoming.

I would like to cite the book *The Days and Nights of the Central West End* (1991), Suzanne Goell, editor; Richard Rothstein's *American Prospect* article, "The Making of Ferguson" (2014); and Mark Groth's blog, *St. Louis City Talk*, for information on the Ville.

Quarry was created in 1971 at the University of Iowa Writers Workshop in Iowa City, and first appeared in print in 1976. An odd and oddly satisfying aspect of writing new Quarry novels for Hard Case Crime has been continuing a series that began as contemporary but is now a period piece. I don't consider these new books, with their '70s and '80s settings, to be historical novels exactly — more like my autobiography published in installments with more sex and violence. Well, more violence.

One autobiographical aspect of *Quarry in the Black* is the Leonard Nimoy rally for McGovern in October of 1972, which my wife Barb and I attended at NIU in DeKalb, Illinois, as supporters of both McGovern and *Star Trek*. In the '90s, I was thrilled to meet Mr. Nimoy when we were both developing comic books for the same company.

Half a dozen years ago, I saw George McGovern standing in the lobby of a hotel in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and was able to chat with him briefly and shake his hand. I introduced him to Barb and said we'd both voted for him. His smile was bitter-sweet as he said, "I wish there'd been more of you."

"So do we, Senator," I said.